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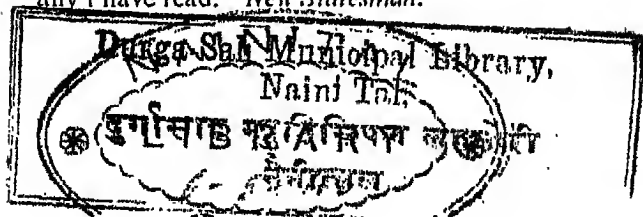
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EARLY in the sixth century the monk Benedict founded a monastery about half-way between Rome and Naples on the crest of a gaunt hill almost two thousand feet above the Roman town of Casinum. Benedict not only possessed a keen sense of spiritual and intellectual values, but also, in the military sense, a very shrewd eye for ground. The Abbey of Monte Cassino was indeed magnificently placed for defence.

In 1944 the German Army paid St. Benedict the military compliment of making his Abbey not only an almost impregnable fortress, but the actual pivot of a massive system of defences. It took six months of the war's most bitter and bloody fighting before it fell. Here is the story of the last assault, by an officer who played his own part in it.

'Books such as *The Monastery* not only astonish by their actuality, but make any novel, except the very best, seem badly written. Here, for once, the words don't depend for their effect on sentimental overtones . . . *Majdalany* . . . gives a picture of battle, of the individuals taking part in it, that is as vivid and complete as any I have read.' *New Statesman*.



THE MONASTERY



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The Monastery

THE
MONASTERY



F. Majdalany

London

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

First published 1945

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For my friends of all
ranks in the 2nd Battalion
XX The Lancashire Fusiliers

FOREWORD

EARLY IN the sixth century a monk called Benedict founded a monastery about half-way between Rome and Naples. He founded it on the site of a temple of Apollo on the crest of a gaunt seventeen-hundred-foot hill overlooking the Roman town of Casinum, where Mark Antony was said to have had a villa in which he gave wild parties.

This monastery exerted a great influence for good over the hearts and minds of Christian men for many years. It became a centre of religion and science and education. It was an outstanding cradle of Christian culture.

It was also well placed to defend itself from attack. For Benedict not only possessed a keen sense of spiritual and intellectual values, but also a shrewd eye, in the military sense, for ground. The precipitous rocky slopes of the hill on which it was built might have been expected to discourage an attacker.

Nevertheless the abbey was sacked by the Lombards just before it was a century old. It was rebuilt in 720, and this time it lasted for a hundred and sixty-four years before it was sacked again—this time by the Saracens in 884. It was again rebuilt, and for the next nine and a half centuries it flourished greatly, and the influence of its Order, founded by St. Benedict, spread far and wide throughout the Christian world, though it had to survive destruction twice more during that time—by the Germans in the thirteenth century and later by Napoleon's army. In 1866 when the monasteries were dissolved, the Abbey of Monte Cassino, to give it its full name, was spared and it became a national monument.

Having survived so long, the ancient abbey might well have expected to be safe from further ravaging. This was

not, however, the case. For early in the year 1944 the Abbey of Monte Cassino was sacked for the third time in its history. And as the technique of sacking has been developed considerably since the earlier and cruder efforts of the Lombards and the Saracens, it was sacked more thoroughly and more terribly than ever before.

At the same time the ancient Roman town of Casinum—now called Cassino—was utterly destroyed. For Cassino, and the monastery which towers above it, had the misfortune to lie in the path of what Winston Churchill has called 'the red-hot rake of the battle lines.' The Germans had paid St. Benedict the military compliment of making the Monastery Hill and the adjacent heights the pivot of a massive system of defences. The monastery itself they turned into a fortress.

It took half a dozen months of bitter, bloody fighting before these defences were finally broken. By the time the Monastery fell, soldiers of Britain, Canada, New Zealand, America, India and Poland had all bought at a high price the right to include in their battle honours 'Cassino.'

Those who fought at Cassino will remember above all the monastery founded by St. Benedict. They will remember as long as they live how it dominated and overshadowed their bodies and their minds during the winter of 1944.

Its influence over the lives of men was as great as ever. But it was not the influence envisaged by its founder fifteen hundred years before.

PART ONE

'You Will Take Over . . .'

THE ORDER to move arrived at noon. It was the usual one, the one which always started things off. The one ordering the company commanders to be ready to move off with the C.O. to the new location. It told us where to assemble; it told us to bring three N.C.O.s, a blanket, and rations for forty-eight hours; it said we would not be coming back; it gave us an hour to be ready.

Every operation started that way. The C.O.'s command group went on ahead to make the preliminary reconnaissance. The rest of the battalion followed—usually a day later.

We knew the message well. It had happened so often. It was routine. In this case we had been expecting it for three days. Nevertheless one always experienced a feeling of slight sickness when it did arrive. It had the finality of the starter's 'get ready' in a race. It was the footstep of the warder to the man in the condemned cell.

You always had that just-before-the-race feeling when the first move order arrived. You took the usual steps not to show it. You made the usual wan little jokes. The others did the same. And no one was deceived. You knew that the others were thinking and feeling exactly the same as you. You knew they were all thinking: 'Oh Christ!'

At 13.00 hours, the six little jeeps, bulging with men and maps and the personal paraphernalia of battle, were lined up ready to move. The C.O. said: 'It's Cassino.'

We moved off down the deeply rutted lane between the extended mud patch that had been our bivouac area for three weeks, and the grey mass the Americans had named Million Dollar Hill, because it had required so many shells before they had finally captured it some weeks before.

At Mignano we turned left into the main road and headed for Cassino, eighteen miles away. This was the road the papers were still delighting in calling the Road to Rome. We called it Route Six because that was how it was marked on our maps. Later, we all compromised, and it came to be known universally as Highway Six.

All the trucks in the world appeared to be tearing up and down that stretch of road; and most of the soldiers in the world seemed to be camping on either side of it. The trucks never stopped. Trucks filled with petrol and food and ammunition. Trucks filled with soldiers. Clean soldiers going in, dirty soldiers coming out. It went on all day, and you could tell which were the American ones because they drove faster than the others. The trucks were grey and muddy and the men were grey and muddy. The ceaseless rain of the past month had reduced men, machines, roads and mountains to the uniform dismal greyness which is the winter colour of all battle zones.

The men in the trucks and the men in the muddy bivouacs along both sides of the Highway were of many nations. British from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales: Americans from Harlem and Americans from Texas: New Zealanders, including many Maoris: Sikhs and Gurkhas from India. It was a scene of vast, yet ordered, confusion. Scores of small coloured sign-boards on either side of the road told you in pictures and numbers and arrows exactly where everyone was in the tangle. And every hundred yards or so, cutting through the signs which led off the Highway into the camps on the right and on the left, there was another sign which pointed straight ahead. It was a yellow battle-axe. This was our own sign—the sign of the 78th Division—marking the route along which we had to pass.

Soon the road straightened out, and we could see the mountains behind Cassino. At that distance and in the misty light they looked like cut-outs on a stage. There was

one slightly in front of the others. On it you could just make out a speck of a building. This was our first glimpse of the Abbey of Monte Cassino—the Monastery. Half a mile further on we turned off the Highway and made for a secondary road about a mile to the right, which provided a more covered route to the battle area, and was a back way to Cassino.

So now it was our turn to have Cassino. Oh, well! We knew it was bound to happen, as soon as it became clear that the New Zealand offensive hadn't achieved a breakthrough. The New Zealanders had fought for several days with the kind of bravery that has made their name a romantic legend in both the great wars. They had successfully stormed Cassino Castle and Cassino Station, both vital strong-points. But in the critical period of the battle torrential rain came down and flooded the plain, while, to make matters worse, the huge craters caused by the famous bombing attack of March 15th filled with water and became impassable water-barriers. Infantry stumbled into them in the darkness and drowned: tanks were unable to traverse them at all: and after an incredible battle in the rubble of the town the front 'line' was stabilized on a curve which passed through the station, the middle of shattered Cassino, the Castle and up through the mountains which rise sharply to the north-east of the town. At many points along this line, only yards separated the two sides.

When we had driven seven or eight miles the Monastery became clearer. It wasn't a cut-out any more, it was a solid stage set. I remembered a description of Athens I once read. The writer described how 'at every turning—there was the Acropolis.' It was like that along this road. At every turning, at the top of every crest, there was the Monastery getting bigger and clearer. The traffic had thinned out in that mysterious way in which it does thin out when you are getting nearer the battle area. And as the road became less crowded, and the battle noise clearer, you

began to get the feeling that the Monastery was watching you.

When you have been fighting a long time you develop an instinct for enemy observation-posts. You spot quickly where they must be, and you seem to know intuitively the exact moment you start being watched. And it is like suddenly being stripped of your clothes. We were being watched now, and we knew it. We were being watched by eyes in the Monastery every inch of the way up the rough little road through the olive groves.

The road had now developed the standard front-line appearance. Burnt-out vehicles, charred and rusty and hideous. Sheaves of telephone cables criss-crossing the ditches and the hedgerows like a giant's crazy knitting. The warning boards which either state with dignity: 'Road Under Shellfire,' or tell you: 'Don't Stop or——!' and accompany the injunction with a macabre little sketch of a man being parted from his head.

There were the little wayside graves, generally in threes and fours, from which the recently dead look on as the living ride by to battle. At steady intervals the ambulances, too, streamed back. Not always ordinary ambulances. Sometimes they were Bren carriers or armoured scout cars, painted white and decorated with the red cross. Occasionally a single truck passed, travelling fast. A set expression on the driver's face as if he were saying, 'Let me pass, let me pass, I want to get away from *there*, let me pass.' Already we were almost past the gun lines. We were entering again the detached and exclusive world of the Infantry: a world that only the Infantry—and those who work with the Infantry—know. The feet of the drivers subconsciously pressed harder on their accelerators, and the jeeps jerked over the ruts and pot-holes like squat little ponies suddenly spurred, for we were now in places where it was not healthy to linger. We drove on past the wayside graves, past the red cross vehicles bringing the wounded back from the

place where we were going. And deep in our hearts we envied the wounded. Lucky wounded. You thought of the peace and quiet to which those wounded were going. You thought of a clean hospital bed. And it seemed the most wonderful and desirable thing in the world to be wounded.

It was nearly five by the time we reached San Michele, where we were to meet the Brigadier, and get our orders. From the crest above the village we could look down over the whole of the Cassino battlefield. Even at a distance, and to eyes not unused to destruction, the ruins of Cassino were awe-inspiring. This was indeed a stricken town. Not a single whole building remained, only fragments of walls and heaps of rubble. These jagged fragments of buildings had a ghostly, slightly obscene quality that is hard to describe; it was like a forest of stalagmites. Cassino in destruction was different from all the other places.

Away to the left ran the thin streak of the Rapido River, stretched like a steel cord across the entrance to the Liri Valley. The fortifications on its far bank linked up with the mountain range which began behind Cassino, and became higher as it went east till it culminated in the towering peak of Monte Cairo, over five thousand feet high, and the anchor of the Cassino defence system.

Stark and clear now was the one that was the most important of them all, because it was the key to all the others—Monastery Hill. Having seen the country we could properly understand now the difficulties of this battle that had already been going on for nearly four months. The Monastery, converted into a fortress and securely planted on the crest of the precipitous rocky slopes of Monastery Hill, commanded a perfect view of every single approach to the Liri Valley, through which an army marching on Rome must pass. This amazing viewpoint—from which the German artillery was so accurately directed for so long—was protected on its eastern side by the moun-

tains and to the west by the narrow but fast-flowing Rapido, and the steel and concrete defences behind it. It was obvious now why the Monastery had become the boggy of every operation.

The Brigadier pointed to a height five miles across the valley that seemed, from where we were looking, to be almost joined to Monastery Hill. 'That's your place,' the Brigadier said.

Shortly before dusk a young staff officer of the brigade we were to relieve arrived to take us forward. He spoke in the strained, jerky, trying-not-to-show-it way of men exhausted by prolonged operations. He seemed so worn out it made one feel guiltily fresh.

'Need to get a move on,' said the staff officer. 'No place to hang about. Tricky ride. Keep close behind me. When we get to the open part of the valley we'll move fast. Everybody ready? Shall we go?'

In the growing darkness we followed the staff officer's jeep, zig-zagging down through the olive groves, until the olive groves were no more, and the track headed diagonally across the open valley, on the stretch that was called the Mad Mile. The Monastery towered above us now, and despite the failing light, one felt terribly naked and visible. The track jerked right, past a tangle of dead mules and wrecked vehicles, over a Bailey bridge, and into a gully that struck straight into the heart of the now black mountain mass. The jeep in front stopped.

'Can't get any further by jeep,' the staff officer said. 'We walk from here. Before we start I'll give you the dope.' He paused.

'It's a perfect sod up there,' he continued. 'A perfect sod. Can't do the whole show in one night. Way we do it is this. To-night you go as far as a place we call the Bowl—just behind our positions. Where you're going it's

so exposed that daylight movement is impossible. So you can't do any reconnaissance till to-morrow night. While you're doing that, the rest of your battalion will be brought up to the Bowl by guides. Night after that you actually take over. Sounds hellishly complicated. Only way it can be done. It's a forty-eight-hour job every time. It's a perfect bloody sod up there,' he added. 'Shall we go?'

It was quite dark as we set off on the final stage of the journey. We walked in single file behind our guide. We wore our greatcoats because it was the easiest way to carry a greatcoat. We carried our blankets in a roll across our shoulders, cursing the additional burden, but knowing we should be glad of them later.

First the track climbed gradually. Then it dipped down into a shallow ravine, and the real ascent started abruptly on the far side. It was a crude path, worn out of the mountainside. At times it was wet and slippery, so that you were constantly on the point of slipping down the precipitous outer slope into the ravine below. At other times it was strewn with loose stones and boulders—with the same result. At all times it was very steep. So there came a time when, burdened down with your greatcoat, your blanket and your equipment, you really didn't care very much if you did go pitching down into the ravine.

Far behind, now, we could see the flashes of the guns we had passed during the afternoon. Ahead we could hear the thump of the German artillery replying, and the sound of tearing silk as the shells flew above our heads in both directions. One felt curiously detached from the whole business at this half-way stage that was far ahead of the rear and still a good way from the front—a sort of false No-Man's-Land.

The first time you make a hard journey to an unknown destination it always seems longer than it really is. I suppose our climb didn't take more than two hours. It seemed an eternity.

At last the leader stopped, and we sank gratefully to the ground.

'This,' said the staff officer, 'is what we call the Bowl. You'll see why in the morning. I suggest you doss down on the slope to your right. Good night. Pleasant dreams.'

I paired off with Jimmie. We groped about till we found a slight cavity approximating to a trench. We slept back to back: the warmest way. It was cold and damp on the bare mountainside. The sweat of the climb soon froze on our faces. We pulled the precious blankets over us and fell into a sleep as thick as the night.

I awoke shortly after first light, wet and frozen, with a large sharp stone in the small of my back, and a black hate towards all Germans. Heavings to my right denoted that Jimmie was also coming to life.

'It must have rained hard,' I said. 'I'm soaking.'

'Rain be damned,' Jimmie said. 'It's snow.'

I wriggled out of the blanket. It was indeed a bowl, where we were. A natural amphitheatre between three hill-sides, with a flat space at the bottom big enough for a hockey pitch. The area was covered by a thin carpet of snow. So, I noted for the first time, were our blankets. It is odd to be snowed on in one's sleep and not wake up.

Jimmie, who seemed to take the snow as a personal affront, just lay there puffing at a cigarette, darkly muttering: 'Bloody snow! Bloody snow!'

Then there was a scream and a whistle and eight shells landed in a neat line across the other side of the Bowl, about a hundred yards away. The rest of our party awakened with considerable abruptness.

Coarse and falsely cheerful greetings echoed up and down the slope. Blasphemy gave the morning air its only warmth, and men became busy with little tins and fires. No power on earth can stop the English breakfast.

After breakfast John and I went forward to find the

headquarters of the battalion we were relieving. As we climbed the spur on the far side of the Bowl, we saw what appeared to be rows of little boots. Then we saw that it was a cemetery. At the head of each grave was a steel helmet: at the foot a pair of tiny boots. We couldn't understand the tiny boots at first. Then we saw a file of men approaching carrying stretchers. They were Gurkhas, the little fighting men of Nepal, from the battalion we were relieving. They were bringing more dead to that desolate little cemetery. In an hour there would be another row of little boots. I couldn't help wondering what they thought about it all, these small brown men from Nepal with the flat Mongol features. I wondered if it made any sense of all to a Gurkha, to find himself brought all the way to Italy to help Englishmen to kill Germans.

This musing was cut short abruptly, for at that moment we cleared the crest of the spur, and there, staring us in the face, was the Monastery. Two rough, evil-looking prongs of masonry sprouting from an untidy chaos of rubble—all that remained of the southernmost tip of the building—like jagged fangs. This first close-up view was unexpected and slightly startling, and we edged over to the right so as to get out of sight of it. As we worked our way up the terraced, shell-torn slope towards the ruin of a building that looked like the headquarters we were seeking, the smell of death—the old familiar smell—became increasingly powerful. The most immediate cause turned out to be a mule, in an advanced stage of decomposition, and black with feasting flies. (Wags later used the mule as a signpost for visitors. They used to say bear hard right when the mule begins to smell really strongly.)

When you smell that smell, then you know you've arrived. You are once again in the world of the Infantry. It is universal and haunting. It is the same, whether it is caused by dead Englishmen, dead Americans, or dead mules. This place was worse than any we had ever known

before because there were hardly any parts of these hills where you could go unobserved. So many of the dead had had to lie where they fell. Dead English, dead Scots, dead Americans, dead Indians. A grim record of races and regiments that had fought up here, the distinctive uniforms and badges alone identifying the mouldering bodies within them—like a stark inventory of crucifixion.

At the headquarters of the Gurkha battalion they were very charming. The Indian doctor gave us tea, and the British colonel gave us information. He told us all the routine things we needed to know. He showed us the maps and the traces and the artillery plan. He pointed out that the area was not only overlooked by the Monastery from the front, but by Monte Cairo from the rear. This meant, he said, that any daylight movement in the forward areas was out of the question. Even the journey we had made that morning from the Bowl to his headquarters was discouraged, he said. It only needed a few men to make the trip carelessly, he said, and down came the shells.

‘There is no water up here,’ the Colonel continued apologetically, as if it was his fault, ‘so like food and ammunition it has to come up on mules every night. This is the furthest point to which mules can get. From here onwards the stuff has to be humped by men. The Indians you passed on the way up here are a company of porters. They’re good chaps,’ he added, as officers of the Indian Army always do. They always seem afraid you won’t think their soldiers are ‘good chaps.’

He explained that San Michele, six miles back, was the forward dump area for the division. Every night mule trains left San Michele, and walked across the valley and did the climb we had done the night before.

‘When they reach here,’ the Colonel said, ‘they are unloaded. The food is cooked down in that gully right in front of you—it is the only place round here where you can

put a cookhouse—and from here it is carried up by the Indian porters.'

He told us other things too. How the ground was too hard for digging, so that trenches were out of the question. Instead of trenches, you had to construct small built-up stone shelters and use them instead.

'Medical evacuation,' he said, 'is a problem. A hell of a problem. The system is that stretcher-bearer posts are established at intervals of two hundred yards all the way down from the forward R.A.P.—which is about three hundred yards from here—all the way down the track you came up last night. There's a dressing station at the bottom. Casualties are handed on from one post to another. On a wet night it means that a chap is lucky if he gets back to the dressing station within eight hours of being hit. Or without being dropped once or twice. The stretcher-bearers are wonderful—but you saw what that track was like last night.

'If you get casualties during the day,' the Colonel said, 'the only thing to do is to put up a red cross flag and get them out openly. You'll find the Boche are all right about it. They have to do the same thing. We've had no trouble with them over the red cross. Actually, I think they like the idea. A suspiciously large number of ambulances always appears to be arriving at the Monastery. We are certain they are using them to bring up ammunition and reinforcements.'

'And now,' the Colonel said, 'have another cup of tea. You probably feel you need it.'

As we drank the tea, he apologized for leaving the place in such a state.

'It is not,' he said, 'exactly where one would choose to live. All these dead, and everything. But you can see that there are difficulties.'

We agreed.

As soon as it was dark that night our companies filed up from the Bowl, and one by one took over from the Gurkha companies. While this was going on, shells were poured into the Monastery, partly to distract the Germans, partly to drown any noise made by our men as they groped their way into those rocky positions, some of which were within fifty yards of the enemy. One by one the company commanders reported themselves in. The two colonels stood together in the ruined building that was headquarters.

Two hours before dawn the last of our men was in position: the last of the Gurkhas set off at high speed down the mountain track so as to get clear of the valley before daylight.

The Adjutant picked up the telephone and said three words to Brigade. 'Take-over completed.'

It was ours—the Monastery, the mountains, the smells. A cemetery for the living.

PART TWO

'You Will Hold At All Costs . . .'

DOWN BELOW to the left was the wide valley, and behind it the hills and the olive groves, which hid the guns and the supply dumps, and the mules which brought the supplies across to the fighting men each night. The valley was beautiful, if you could bring yourself to notice it. It was generally misty. Sometimes of its own accord, but more often because of the thousands of smoke-shells which our guns poured into it every day in order to neutralize as much as possible the fine view of our activities which the enemy had from the Monastery.

Across the valley ran Highway Six—a grey ribbon which stretched in a straight line for three miles until it twisted out of sight behind Monte Trocchio.

The valley looked especially beautiful at the beginning of the day. Then the morning ground mist mingled with the white fog of the smoke-shells, and for an hour or more the whole sweeping breadth of it seemed blanketed in fleecy little cushions of cotton-wool.

The more local prospect was as hideous as the distant one was beautiful. Everything that could grow had been actively discouraged from ever doing so again. Weeks of shell-fire had blasted the trees into lacerated stumps. The wildest of wild flowers had given up trying.

Immediately in front of our headquarters, there was a scowling, boulder-strewn ridge, which gave us some good O.P.s overlooking the Monastery and some machine-gun positions, but had absolutely no aesthetic value whatever. The hovel where we had our headquarters consisted of two crumbly ground-floor 'rooms.' The upper part of the dwelling—which may once have belonged to a not-too-

house-proud shepherd—had been reduced to a decaying mass of rubble and battle wreckage. We set up our command post in one of the lower rooms.

Eight of us lived in this room, together with large numbers of centipedes and other crawling things. These had a disconcerting habit of dropping from the gaps between the damp, sagging planks which precariously comprised our ceiling. Some of the centipedes were over three inches long and were not the least unpleasant feature of the residence. Shells are not nice, but you can hear them coming.

In the similar apartment next-door the doctor established his R.A.P. Along the terraces sloping sharply down the mountain lived the remainder of the headquarters' men. The ground was too hard to dig trenches, so they lived in little stone shelters, with a considerable and ever-growing thickness of roof against the direct hit. Improving these dwellings was one of the primary occupations.

On the lower end of the ridge to our front was the machine-gun platoon. By night they manned their positions fully. By day, while concealed sentries kept watch, the others rested in neolithic dwellings, of the type already described, just below the crest. From the command post it looked like one of those Arab hill-villages in the more barren parts of North Africa. The ridge became known as Machine-gun Ridge. One of the disadvantages of being a machine-gunner in that position was that you couldn't stir an inch by day. You had to keep inside your shelter throughout the hours of daylight as the position was over-looked by the German O.P.s on Monte Cairo to the rear.

In the gully below Machine-gun Ridge were the company cookhouses. There, too, lived the reserve company. The food the mules brought up each night was cooked down there the following afternoon, and that night it was carried forward as soon as it was dusk by the Indian porters to the three forward companies. It wasn't a three-course dinner

that the Indian porters carried up each night in sand-bags. Not that a three-course dinner was beyond the powers of Sergeant-Cook Whittingham in the gully. The problem was getting the meal to the forward positions, and distributing it having got it there, as the enemy were less than fifty yards away from some of the posts. House-keeping in the places the infantry gets to is seldom without a number of difficulties for which Mrs. Beeton never made any allowance. The solution in this case was to convert the meat into pies and pasties. These were portable and easily distributed. They could be kept fairly warm by an insulation of newspaper and straw inside the sandbags in which they were carried up. They were reasonably warm, fairly filling and preferable to indefinite bully beef out of a tin. Every forty-eight hours one of the forward companies was relieved by the reserve company. During its period in reserve, a company made up for the limited battle menu with a succession of enormous hot meals in the gully.

The worst feature of the foremost positions was the impossibility of moving by day without being seen by the enemy. It wasn't very funny spending all the twelve hours of daylight cramped with one other man in your shelter. You could make it quite comfortable with blankets, it is true. And after being awake and alert most of the night, a good proportion of the day was devoted to sleep. But with shells and mortar-bombs sleep was seldom unbroken. All a man had to look forward to at the end of the day was a meal of half-warm meat pasties and another long night of straining alertness. And all daylight activities, whether eating or anything else, had to be conducted in the lying position.

Some idea of the effects of this existence may be gathered from the fact that when a company was relieved after doing the longest period they had to do forward—six days—limbs and muscles were so stiff that men frequently had great difficulty in marching out of their positions at all.

Hygiene, as may be imagined, is not the least of a man's difficulties at such times. Such water as could be got forward on the backs of the porters was far too precious to be wasted on washing. The limited supply was reserved for making tea.

Other aspects of hygiene couldn't be so lightly dismissed. The no-movement-by-day rule made normal 'regular habits' impossible. Visits to the latrines, therefore, had to be postponed until evening, so that they could take place under cover of darkness. As soon as it was dusk, the soldiers would crawl from their shelters, and you would see small groups of bare hindquarters showing white in the semi-darkness, like grotesque friezes: their owners fervently praying that they might complete the proceeding before a shell struck the area. For shelling—frightening at any time—is worst of all when it catches you with your trousers down.

Difficult and unpleasant as this routine was, especially in view of the indifferent diet to which it was allied, men got used to it, as the Infantry will get used to anything, and the system worked quite well. Unless, of course, you happened, like Lieutenant B., to get dysentery. Lieutenant B. was therefore prevented from conforming with the after-dark schedule. He was compelled to fulfil the exacting demands of his illness as best he could with empty bully-beef tins. They couldn't be thrown out of the shelter in the daytime as this would have given away the position. Despite these circumstances, Lieutenant B., who is twenty-one, commanded his platoon without a break.

A living routine of this type doesn't just happen in a day. It required several days and nights before these matters of food and drink and hygiene and living comfort had been developed into a workable smooth routine: days and nights of trial and error, experiment and suggestion, argument and head-scratching. Yet it was only a matter of a few days before man had mastered an animal way of living, in

which man alone among animals could probably have survived.

In the headquarters area we were slightly better off. We could move in the daytime. We could not move far. But we could move. We could have a latrine, and we could go to it in daylight. By rigorous rationing we could spare water for shaving on the basis of half an inch of water in the bottom of a petrol can between two or three men.

I have found that when civilized living has to be temporarily suspended, there are three hygienic essentials to one's well-being: teeth, shaving, and nails—in that order. Teeth, fortunately, present no difficulty. Once you have got used to the idea, the operation can be carried out without water, except for a few drops to clean the brush. And damp early morning grass does that just as well. A shave, as the Army has always known, works wonders with one's morale. And a shave can be contrived from as much liquid as is normally left at the bottom of a tea-cup. Filing the nails—apart from considerations of cleanliness—I always found to be an admirable occupational therapy when I was very frightened. If these three items can be attended to, you can easily go without washing for quite a long time. Especially if you use anti-louse powder.

Compared with the men in the forward positions, we were relatively lucky, because we didn't have to spend all day in a stone shelter. In respect of all other horrors, our lot was the same.

The conception of 'home' is purely relative. So that the command post, despite the dirt, the lice, the centipedes, the smells and the leaky roof, soon became home to those of us who lived in it. We changed everything round, which is always a good start when you take over a place that has belonged to somebody else. We filled it with the usual operational furniture. That is to say, the largest available box was covered with a blanket (universal Army table-

cloth) and became The Table. Lesser boxes became chairs. Half a petrol tin made a good wash-bowl, even if there was seldom much water to put in it. The general effect was *Journey's End*-ish, but the detail was better. We have progressed quite a lot in this war. The candle-in-bottle system of lighting may now be considered obsolete except in the most desperate circumstances. In a war in which motor transport and wireless play such an important part, light bulbs and batteries are priority articles. There is, therefore, no excuse for the most primitive front-line abode being without electric light nowadays.

Such, then, was the background and the setting in which we set about those routine duties which keep everyone busy during the early days in a defensive position. In similar high places, to our right and our left, the other battalions of the division were doing exactly the same thing. And no doubt we were all feeling certain that ours was much the worst place of all, as battalions always do.

Everyone was busy with his own job in those first few days. None more so than Harry. Harry was one of those great characters that only the Army could produce. Still young by ordinary standards (though nearer forty than thirty), he was very old and very wise in the ways of the Army. Fashioned and shaped and nurtured by the Army, he could still rise above it. He was of the Army, and loved the Army, but he could laugh at it better than anyone.

Harry had risen through the ranks of the Artillery until he had gained fame as an instructor of gunnery. Many of the outstanding soldiers of the day had passed through his hands as students. He could refer to more than one general in the voice a nanny employs when discussing naughty ex-charges. He was a major now, and had thrown up an important instructional job to command a battery in the field, 'to bring myself up to date,' Harry said.

To Harry, gunnery was not merely a matter of killing Germans with shells. It was something more. It was an

exact science, of course. But it was much more than that even. It was a vocation, and a philosophy of life. That a number of Germans met their death in the process was really neither here nor there. That was useful, of course, because it helped to win the war. But the war was an ephemeral thing, and gunnery was eternal. Harry was aiming at something higher. His life, you felt, was dedicated to a sacred quest for a Holy Grail of absolute and perfect gunnery.

He had the old soldier's knack of making himself comfortable anywhere. The rest of us used to crawl between our blankets in our shirts and trousers. Not Harry. He never slept in anything but crisp, white pyjamas. And he slept between sheets. And in spite of the general squalor, the sheets and the pyjamas always appeared to be spotless. In the early morning he always shaved long before anyone else, and appeared spruce and fresh as if straight from a shower: his trousers were invariably well creased, and his boots shiny. How he kept this up, no one ever knew. Old soldiers have their secrets which are not divulged to lesser mortals.

There was plenty for Harry to do in the early days near the Monastery. From an artillery point of view the technical difficulties were great. Our own forward troops and those of the enemy were exceedingly close—less than a hundred yards in places. It would require the most accurate shooting to be able to hit the German positions without endangering our own men. The Germans knew this, and had counted on their closeness to frighten us out of shooting, and so neutralize our superiority in guns. Such a situation was just Harry's cup of tea. It was a direct challenge to his pride, skill and knowledge. They'd soon see if he could hit them or not!

So for three or four days Harry sat near his wireless-set with his maps, patiently ranging one gun at a time on every place the Germans held, and every place to which they

might go. An observing officer would report over the wireless the fall of each shell. Harry would then make rapid mathematical calculations and pass a new order back over the wireless to the guns. And when each place had been fairly and squarely hit, Harry would mark it on his map and give it a name or a number. It was then recorded by another officer back with the guns for future reference. So that Harry's map became an accurate catalogue of places that could be hit on demand. If a machine-gun opened fire, you looked at the map and you found that they were in the neighbourhood of target Mike Seven, in Harry's language.

'Harry,' you'd say, 'machine-guns have opened up—can you smack Mike Seven?' Harry would jump to the wireless—in his white pyjamas, if it was at night—and hiss an order to the guns. Then he'd say briskly, 'Five rounds a gun from the regiment—should be over any time now—that's 120 rounds.' He'd then sit with a quizzical frown on his face until the silence was shattered by an outburst of vicious cracks from the gun lines on the far side of the valley. Then he'd beam happily, and say to the C.O.: 'Rounds on their way, sir!'

At the other end of the command post John used to sit at a little table, eighteen inches square, which one of the pioneers had made out of odd pieces of wood lying about the area. We called it the Ops. Table, and John would sit at it hour after hour peering at his maps and his air photographs through a magnifying-glass. While Harry was registering his guns on to places the Germans might go, John would be finding more places for him to shoot at.

'You know, Harry, I'm certain I know where those mortars are. I'll bet you anything you like they're *there*. Behind that bank.'

'Do you think you could hit that, Harry?' Mac would say. Harry would rub his chin and say:

'Yes. That's between Sugar Twelve and Freddie Two.'

His eyes would swivel up to the ceiling. His lips would move in rapid calculation. 'Yes, we can hit that,' he'd say. 'We can hit that all right. It's really Sugar Twelve north three hundred.'

'Do you think you could give it a dosing now, Harry,' John would say gently. 'Just to liven it up a little. We might just happen to catch someone having a shave or something.'

Harry would get on the wireless, a dosing would be arranged, and everyone would feel that something had been achieved.

The Monastery lost no time in showing its teeth. Soon after dark on the first evening the telephone buzzed. A voice said: 'Dog Company being mortared from the Monastery.' It was like the first over being bowled in a Test Match. The duel which was then fought for the first time was to become a very familiar feature of our lives in the next month. It was a lethal shouting match, the form of which seldom varied. It occurred on an average three or four times daily and at least a dozen times a night.

It would start as this first one started. Light mortars and rifle-grenades would be flung at one of our companies. The company would reply with its own light mortars, and at the same time report back. Weightier arguments, in the form of medium and heavy mortars, would be tossed back on to the nearest position. ('See what you get if you start anything, you so-and-so's!') Then, if they were in the mood, the Boche would bring their own heavier mortars into action. ('So what?') If they showed the slightest disposition to continue the argument, we then smashed at them with a regiment of artillery. ('We warned you!') That usually had the last word, and the discussion was adjourned. It was really just a great big game of cowboys-and-Indians, with the unfortunate difference that someone always had to die, and more had to be maimed. The

remarkable thing about modern shelling is not how many it kills, but how few. These constant exchanges of fire, however, were far from being a sedative to the nerves of men who were more often than not wet and cold, getting no proper rest, and subsisting on the diet already described.

The following evening, shortly after dusk, John said, 'Let's walk up to Snake's Head and have a look.' He said it in the tone of voice in which you say, 'Let's walk round to the Royal for a quick one before dinner.'

The Americans had christened it Snake's Head. It was a defile at the upper end of Cookhouse Gully to our front. It was a notorious 'hot' spot. In daylight it was in view of several German O.P.s, and it was one of their favourite mortar targets. It was on the main route to our companies, and the Boche knew it. They mortared it pretty constantly. So we set off up the gully, and Wilks came too. As we approached Snake's Head, we came upon the aftermath of a considerable battle. American equipment was scattered everywhere—tin hats, ammunition pouches, bits of rifles, bits of machine-guns, bits of boots and bits of clothing. One of the tin hats had half a head in it. One of the boots contained most of a leg. We came upon several used rocket canisters from the German six-barrelled mortar. These rocket-bombs do not splinter like the ordinary kind. They achieve their effect by blast, and when they explode the thin metal curls back in strips like a banana peel. There were several of these black objects lying around, shaped like enormous bottles and peeled like bananas, and they explained the other wreckage.

We walked on, and near the defile itself we came upon what had been a section post. There were shelters for eight men, and in them the remains of eight men. In the gathering dusk, with the grey ridge steep and glowering on our left, it was an ugly scene. One was not unaccustomed to unpleasant scenes, but this had a quality of its own.

One had a slight uncanny feeling of affinity with those who had died in that place. One's senses and instincts seemed to rise to a full and accurate consciousness of a terrible agony that had been experienced in that place on some awful morning a few weeks before. There had been a crucifixion there, and no ordinary crucifixion, and you felt it and wanted to get away, and never come back. These things may seem odd, when recollected afterwards in tranquillity. It is relatively easy to seize upon rational explanations; overwrought nerves, and suchlike. But, to soldiers who have known the extremities of battle, explanations are not necessary.

We pottered about and no one spoke for a while. Then John bent forward and picked up a map-case which lay, unscratched, in a mass of debris.

'It's a nice map-case,' John said.

We studied it solemnly. 'Yes,' we said, 'it's a nice map-case.'

After that we completed our mission, which was to reconnoitre some possible machine-gun positions.

We walked back by a different path, and came upon a dead American soldier. He lay on a stretcher. Both his arms were bandaged. He must have been wounded, and on his way back. The colour of his flesh was grey-green like his clothes. He must have been there a week or two. We made a mental note of the spot, and walked on.

Vergil has a line about 'Dank night rushing down from the heavens.' I always used to think it was an excessively extravagant way of describing the end of the day. But on the final stretch of the journey back from Snake's Head, dank night, strangely enough, did in fact give the impression of rushing down and chasing away the last of day. Almost as if it thought the scene up there was too awful to contemplate for a moment longer than was necessary.

Later that night, the R.S.M., who had started to organize the burial of the unburied dead in the area, came into the

command post and saluted. 'We buried them dead Yanks, sir,' he said.

During the evening the telephone was busy. 'Able Company being mortared from the Monastery. Charlie Company being mortared from the Monastery. Baker Company being shelled.' Harry was hardly away from his wireless-set for two hours—hissing his strange gunner language into the mouthpiece, and bringing forth a tenfold reply every time our people reported they were being annoyed. Then there was a message from Able to say that the company commander had been badly wounded, together with the platoon officer he was visiting at the time.

The mules used to arrive about eleven. Their arrival was the big event of the evening. It took them more than three hours to do the six-mile journey from San Michele on the other side of the valley. Seven or eight hundred mules used to set out from there every evening after dark to take up one day's supplies for the division. San Michele itself was a sort of mule Clapham Junction, where the different battalions' mule trains were marshalled and sorted and controlled so that they passed on to the main track without congestion, or delay. This task occupied a large number of the divisional military police. Each of the nine battalions of the division required anything from sixty to a hundred mules a night. They would set off in single file, and the line would stretch right across the valley. At the head of each battalion's column would be an officer, at the rear a second officer: with every pair of mules an N.C.O. or soldier, in addition to the Italian or Indian muleteer.

It might sound a simple matter, just walking with a mule train. It was a simple matter a lot of the time. It was a perfectly simple matter until a load slipped and the mule got in a huff about it, and you had to get the load on again in the dark: or a mule started to slip off one of the mountain tracks, and take you with it: or an Italian

muleteer decided that the game was too risky and tried to divert his pair off the route and disappear into the darkness with a platoon's water-supply for the next day: or a salvo of shells landed somewhere near, and you had to persuade the mules that there was really nothing to be alarmed about: or a temperamental mule suddenly decided he wouldn't cross a Bailey bridge. Mules are frequently peculiar about crossing water.

At all the track junctions and corners on the way there would be a military policeman. It is a great pity that the popular conception of the Redcap is largely derived from the military police in large towns in England, whose duties mainly consist in charging soldiers on leave with minor offences in dress and everyday discipline. It is impossible to praise too highly the work of the Redcaps who are a part of every fighting division. Their job in the fighting zones is the vast one of traffic control—whether it be hundreds of vehicles or hundreds of mules. In this instance they used to stand at all the key points from the beginning of the evening, until the last mule had passed on the way back shortly before dawn. Many of these places were plague-spots for shelling. But the Redcaps never seemed to mind. They never wore a tin hat. Always the familiar red one, and the impeccable white belt and equipment. They developed a tradition of courteous helpfulness which never broke down under the most adverse and dangerous conditions.

Our own chief of mules was Miles, the second-in-command. Miles liked mules, and mules liked Miles—which was a great help, because it meant that most of ours usually arrived. A few went astray. But on most nights the majority seemed to get through and we never went unduly short of anything. By the time Miles had reached the command post after his three-hour struggle with the mules (not much trouble), the muleteers (much more trouble), the shells (more trouble still) and the precipitous

mountain ascent (most trouble of all), he was in no fit state for polite conversation. His arrival most evenings around eleven used to be one of the few amusing incidents of our day. He was noted for a facility for lurid language far above the average in inventiveness, variety and vehemence. Whatever mishaps befell his column on the way up would be recounted with a wealth of profane abuse that never once relied on repetition. It became a part of our daily round, this little outburst, and we wouldn't have missed it for anything. One is forced, in such places, to squeeze laughter out of the simplest matters. Normal standards of humour, like normal standards of everything else, cease to apply.

Not only did the mules bring up food and water and ammunition. They brought up our mail, and the Army newspapers, and cigarettes, and gossip from the outside world. So that between eleven and midnight was the pleasantest and most sociable period of the day and night. By midnight the mules would have gone, the rations they brought up were sorted, the letters had been opened and read. Those not on duty could get a few hours of sleep before 'Stand-to' at 5.30 a.m. And those who had to stay awake knew the familiar feeling of dread which is inseparable from night-time in the line. Will there be a counter-attack? What's hatching in the Monastery?

Taffy came up from his platoon area soon after six, and as soon as it was dusk we set off towards the artillery O.P., which was on the highest point of Machine-gun Ridge. We wanted to range the mortars on to some points near the Monastery. The O.P., which had originally been made by the Boche, was desperately narrow, but we wormed our way in and managed to force our heads through the narrow slit in the roof, which had clearly been designed for only one head. It was a queer feeling. As if one was poking one's head through the roof of the world. The view of the

adversary eleven hundred yards away was magnificent. The brooding, battered abbey sprawled along the crest of its incredible mountain plinth like a sleeping monster. From our present viewpoint we were looking down on it, which gave it a three-dimensional majesty that was missing from the profile you got from our other O.P.s lower down.

Having shouted the necessary orders down to the signaller inside the O.P. to pass by telephone to the Mortars, we stood with our heads poked through the roof of the world and watched the first round fall smack on the southern wing of the Monastery. We were using smoke-bombs, because their burst is easier to observe in semi-darkness. They are filled with phosphorus, and when they burst they throw up a brilliant cascade of white-green sparks. As it grew darker, the brilliance of the exploding bombs increased. When we had registered all our targets, we ordered a final group of rounds, just for the pleasure of seeing the silhouette of the great ruin lit up momentarily, when the bombs burst almost simultaneously along its length.

We stumbled back down the Ridge, well pleased. Like Harry with his guns, we felt confident now that we had an accurate catalogue of places where Germans might be, and which the mortars, if required, could reach by consulting the target record. Thus is the pattern of a defensive plan built up stage by stage. There was another cause for pleasure, too. There was a sense almost of fulfilment in having directed one's first personal blow against the Monastery.

Later that evening it rained heavily, and everyone was soaked. Ironically, the deluge coincided with an evening when our stock of water was particularly low, so that the normal daily ration of two mugs of tea had to be reduced to one. The Boche stepped-up the shelling, too. Snake's Head came in for particularly vicious treatment and the 'overs' burst all round the command post. The forward

companies had their hardest night to date, and there were several casualties. So morale in the command post was rather below par, though it lifted slightly when the mules arrived with rum and mail. It was a big mail and included a batch of newspapers from England. In one of them a violent controversy was raging (or had been—the papers were six weeks old) over the desirability of bombing and shelling Cassino Monastery! Numerous worthy citizens, including a bishop, had written to the newspaper to say that they were against it.

The conducting of fatuous arguments through the correspondence columns of the newspapers (to which high ecclesiastics seem especially prone) is one of the more harmless national pastimes, and normally one to be encouraged if only for the wealth of material it provides for humorous writers like Gubbins and Beachcomber. The present argument, however, seemed rather more moronic than usual, and even in questionable taste. It could hardly be expected to commend itself, for instance, to the shivering, rain-soaked sentries who had to keep ducking for cover on this particular evening, because the Monastery mortars and machine-guns were more active than usual.

I am afraid an extra dash of venom went with the shells we sent into the Monastery.

The fire plans were now as complete as they could be. Section positions had been changed or adjusted. The supply system had been finally mastered. These matters had kept everyone busy in his own sphere, so that the first few days slipped by without one really noticing it.

We began to experience again that sense of being on top of the job which every seasoned fighting team knows. The feeling that this was one of the hardest nuts you ever had to crack, but the early, difficult stage has now been successfully overcome, and once again the old gang has come out on top. Everything is beginning to work

smoothly, the way it did in all the other difficult places. It is this spontaneous consciousness of collective skill and devotion that causes one battalion to do better than another, though both are composed of equal numbers of more or less equivalent Englishmen, armed with identical tools of war. It is deep and satisfying and compensates you for the unpleasant things. It is something that, once felt, can never be forgotten.

On the sixth afternoon, this feeling of well-being coupled with confidence (sometimes referred to as morale) was definitely the highest it had been since the take-over. Apart from anything else, the sun was shining for the first time. In an animal existence the sun is a major pleasure. Everyone felt fine. Then, abruptly, there was the familiar delicate shush-shush, followed by the flat, grating, guttural crash of half a dozen mortar bombs. They missed the command post by ten feet and burst around the shelter of Steve, the machine-gun officer. Steve was having a conference at the time with members of his platoon. They were standing at the entrance to the shelter, using its roof as a table for their maps. A sergeant and a fusilier were badly wounded. Steve himself was blown over, but the only shrapnel to hit him struck him on the front of the thigh. Luckily for Steve, it was the thigh which carries a large pocket, on battledress trousers. The pocket contained Steve's stiff-backed note-book. The shrapnel tore through the trousers, and tore into the note-book. But it failed to tear into Steve, and merely left him shocked, and with one of those narrow-escape stories with which men regale their sons and nephews after wars are over.

Another sergeant and another fusilier in an adjacent shelter were killed outright. It happened that in view of these sudden explosive visitations an order had been issued that men were not to move about in the open any more than was necessary—in their own interests they were to remain under the cover of their shelters as much as pos-

sible. It was ironical that the only two who died were the two who complied with the safety order. The shelters which were their homes became their tombs.

That evening, most of our little colony could be seen heaping more and more earth and stones on the roofs of their dwellings. There is nothing like a horse's escape for making people close stable doors. In the command post eyes stole surreptitiously upwards, and at least one mind presumed to wonder how the sagging ceiling (of which no reinforcement was possible) would have fared under a direct hit. That mind had reason to believe it was not alone in these musings.

Defensive war is very much more than a matter of putting quantities of men, guns, mines and barbed wire in the right places and ensuring that they get supplied. Defence doesn't begin until all that has been done. The success or failure of a defensive battle depends entirely on the attitude of mind of the commander.

Some commanders prefer to sit back in their defences and avoid stirring up trouble. If the other side is not shelling much they don't shell much either. What is the point, they say, of 'starting anything'? It only makes everything more difficult for everyone. As a result they may temporarily enjoy the relative peace of a quiet sector. Until the opposing commander, sensing weakness, plans a surprise coup and catches them with their pants down.

There was never the slightest possibility of a sector which contained John ever becoming a quiet sector. John was allergic to quiet sectors. John belonged to the opposing school of thought, which held that defence was simply an irritating interval between attacks, which must be used to promote the maximum amount of alarm and despondency on the opposing side. So far from avoiding stirring up trouble, he would go without sleep, racking his brains for some new kind of trouble to stir up. He loved the Artillery, and at the merest suspicion that a German had been seen

moving somewhere, he'd have every available gun pound the place for several minutes. If he was feeling bored, he'd suddenly jump up and say, 'Couldn't we let the mortars have a go at something—they haven't had a shoot lately?'

We'd been up there over a week. Everything was working smoothly. There was much less for everyone to do. John began to get restless. I knew the signs well. He'd sit at his little table peering at the air photos. Then he'd go out and wander about the area chatting with soldiers. Then he'd come back to his table and write a letter. Then he'd have an idea.

The idea he had that afternoon came to be known as the Ghost Gun.

'Is there any difficulty,' John wanted to know, 'about firing a machine-gun by remote control?'

We couldn't think of any.

'If we could site a Vickers out in No-Man's-Land, and operate it by remote control, it would draw a lot of fire, and it would annoy the Boche. It could be aimed at one of the Monastery windows,' John said. 'Sergeant Mucky will like the idea. It will give him something to do in the daytime.'

Sergeant Mucky came from Wigan. There were many remarkable things about Sergeant Mucky, but the most remarkable thing of all was his head, which was quite round. His cheeks were bulbous and pink. His hair, which was fair, had grown very thin on top, and was kept very short at the sides. He had a turned-up nose and a pair of piercing, honest blue eyes. The result of this strange ensemble was that Sergeant Mucky exactly resembled a baby that had mysteriously been inflated to the size of a man.

The unusual shape of his head made it impossible for him to wear any of the normal types of Army hat with any degree of success. So at all times he wore on his head the item the Army has whimsically defined as a Cap Com-

forter. This is a short, double-thickness scarf, which can be swiftly converted into a woolly cap. This cap added the final delicious touch to the picture of cherubic infancy.

There were other things about Sergeant Mucky. Those who had shared slit-trenches and dug-outs with him through three campaigns would tell you that not a single day had ever gone by without Sergeant Mucky writing a letter to Mrs. Sergeant Mucky. If—as often happens during operations—two or three days passed without it being possible to get mail back for dispatch, that made no difference. The letter was written every day just the same. Sometimes as many as six piled up before the opportunity occurred to get them censored and sent back.

After his wife and his baby girl, Sergeant Mucky had one other love—the Vickers machine-gun. He devoutly believed that it was the most beautiful and splendid thing that man had ever created. To clean it and care for it was an honour: to fire it at Germans was the highest of all pleasures: to teach and initiate other men into its uses was an apostolic mission.

At the present time he was in charge of the platoon up on Machine-gun Ridge. I 'phoned him and told him that the C.O. and I would be visiting him around seven that night, so that he could warn his sentries.

It was bright moonlight when John and I panted up the last steep stretch to the crest of the ridge. A hoarse Lancastrian voice challenged us. The figure of Sergeant Mucky stepped from behind a large boulder. He carried a tommy-gun and appeared to be wearing a tea-cosy of huge dimensions. As we finished the climb, I remarked that his headdress appeared to have surpassed itself, even for him. He told me it was an ordinary sandbag, with the opening rolled down into a thick tyre. It fitted neatly over the usual woolly cap, he said, and it was very warm.

I told him about the Ghost Gun. He thought it over for a long time. Then he smiled very broadly and said: 'It's

a good idea.' We were enormously relieved that he approved. A Lancashire soldier's approbation is not easily won.

We had arranged for one of the reserve guns to be brought up for the experiment. As soon as it arrived we set off into No-Man's-Land, with the gun and a large amount of cable.

Beyond the crest the feature fell away in a sweeping, gradual slope until it disappeared into the deep ravine which protected the northern side of Monastery Hill. The three of us picked our way forward, John, Sergeant Mucky and myself, and after we had gone about three hundred yards we found a spot that seemed to meet our requirements. Two rocks between which the gun could be wedged and a number of small bushes that could be used for camouflage.

Bathed in moonlight, the Monastery looked incredibly beautiful. And horribly near. Point 445, a bump forward of Monastery Hill, on which the Boche had an outpost position, showed up with disconcerting clearness a very short distance away.

It was a strange sensation being there with just two others in that lonely expanse of stillness. You felt completely detached. Down on the left was Cassino Castle, daringly held by the Royal West Kents under the very nose of the Monastery. Most of the time we were out there the stillness was so marked you could almost, paradoxically, hear it. Then it would suddenly be shattered by the night battle sounds. And because of the ravines and the steep rocky mountains, these battle sounds echoed more loudly and eerily. The sudden hysterical screech of a Schmeisser. The steady chug-chug of a distant-answering Bren. Then utter silence. Then the low chilling burr of the M.G. 42, which is Germany's best machine-gun, and sounds like a distant motor-cycle moving at a hundred miles an hour. And behind us, regular as a bus service, the noise of

tearing silk as giant shells from the heavy batteries at Piedimonte sped swiftly over our ridge, seeming to clear it by inches, and bursting with a clap of thunder and a searing flash along the route they knew to be our supply line.

Then a green light soared up near Cassino Castle. It hovered for an instant desperately—then flopped down like a dying bird. The usual tense reaction. Ours or theirs? A signal? For what? We waited for the outburst of artillery and mortar fire. There was none. There was nothing but silence. It must have been a windy sentry. Tearing silk again. Screeching Schmeisser again. Three screeches—long screeches. Then silence.

One was conscious of being very near to danger without being afraid in the way one is afraid while being shot at. The danger was impersonal. In a way it was exhilarating. A sort of emotional astringent. I imagine it was something like the feeling mountaineers have during a difficult climb.

The bright moonlight added to the general eeriness. You could see the Monastery so clearly you felt it must be bound to see you—though you knew that was impossible.

We had a lot of trouble fixing the two-hundred-and-fifty-round belt so that it would feed the gun automatically, in the absence of a man to hold it, but the job was eventually done. The gun and the ammunition were immovably wedged in position. The muzzle was pointing towards the windows at the right or northern end of the Monastery—the end the shells could not easily reach, and therefore the best preserved part of the building.

Well pleased with ourselves, like schoolboys who have at last managed to put together a complicated new toy, we turned our back on the screech of the Schmeissers, and crept slowly back towards the ridge and the noise of tearing silk. As we went along we set the cable, which we'd attached to the trigger mechanism of the gun, against smooth rocks which would act as pulleys.

Back in the little cave, which was Sergeant Mucky's headquarters, we held our breath as the great moment arrived for the first pull. John solemnly grasped the cable and tugged. Nothing happened. We each had a pull in turn. Nothing happened. There seemed to be a lot of play in the cable, and it was like pulling elastic. We had a final despairing tug together. But the gun wouldn't play. With one voice we swore. Then we wearily made our way back to the gun. Nothing had moved. The connections were still secure. It must be the cable. So on the way back this time we selected the route for the cable more carefully and succeeded in eliminating several corners.

Once more we pulled. This time, to our unspeakable joy, there was a triumphant rattle in front, and half a dozen rounds zipped away towards the Monastery windows. We were so delighted with our success that we couldn't leave the toy alone. We went on having pulls to see who could get the longest burst away, until the gun jammed. Then we made the journey out into No-Man's-Land for the third time to load the gun with a new belt. Back in the cave, we just had one more short, sharp pull to make sure the thing still worked. Then the temptation to go on playing was sternly resisted.

The Ghost Gun plan was explained in detail to Sergeant Mucky. Each morning, shortly after first light, he was to take a new belt out, and aim the gun carefully at one of the Monastery windows—a different window each day. Then at intervals throughout the day he was to pull the cable and loose off a provocative burst. When the answering machine-gun and mortar fire came back—as it certainly would—he was to let it have its say. Then after allowing the Boche time to pat themselves on the back for silencing our gun, he was to fire another burst, which would serve as a sort of rude gesture. This was calculated to enrage the Herrenvolk and tease them into wasting a lot of ammunition on an unoccupied area; to act as a general

nuisance; and last, but not least—to brighten up the dull day of Sergeant Mucky and his men, forced to spend the daytime cramped in their stone shelters. The psychological value of hitting back is enormous in defence. Greatly pleased with the night's work, John and I hurried back down the ridge to the command post to tell everyone about it.

We arrived in the middle of the nightly eleven-to-midnight scuffle. Another rum ration had come up, which was good. No letters, though, which was bad. Lots of water, however, which was wonderful. It meant three mugs of tea instead of two the next day.

The R.S.M. came in in the blue jersey he affected in action, and said they'd buried another five that evening. That made twenty-one altogether since we'd moved in, apart from our own chaps. All the crosses were up except three, which would be ready to-morrow. Sergeant Myers was working on the crosses now.

The padre poked his head inside and said he was celebrating Holy Communion in the R.A.P. at ten the next morning, if anyone cared to come.

A subaltern reported back from a short leave at the divisional rest-centre in Maiori, on the lovely Sorrento peninsula. He said he had slept solidly for three days, only waking up for meals. His freshness and spruceness contrasted with the appearance of the rest of us.

Another subaltern checked-in from one of the companies on his way down to go on leave. He had forty-year-old eyes in a twenty-year-old face. He was bearded, and his pallor was streaked with the grey of prolonged dirt. He said he thought he could sleep for a week, without waking up for meals. He saluted weakly and disappeared into the darkness, to hasten towards his brief liberty.

Tom put the telephone receiver down and said: 'All the bloody lines have gone again.' He walked across to where the signallers were. 'Open up on wireless,' Tom

ordered, 'and tell Sergeant Rowson to warn a line-party to stand by.' Then he vanished.

The lines were always going. The shelling hit relatively few men, considering its weight and volume. But it never failed to hit—and cut—a telephone cable. And we were almost entirely dependent on telephones for our forward communications between battalion headquarters and the companies. Although in touch by wireless, nearly every conversation needed the security of the telephone, as wireless could be intercepted. So every time a line was cut somebody had to go out, find the break, and mend it. This duty was carried out by the regimental signallers. These were not Corps of Signals specialists. They were ordinary private soldiers of the Infantry trained in signalling duties. Theirs was the dangerous task of maintaining the telephone lines in the very forward areas.

That was why Tom had vanished. He had vanished to organize line-parties to all the company positions because all the lines were cut.

The signallers usually worked in pairs. As soon as a cut was discovered they'd go hurrying off with their knives and their insulating tape, and run the cable through their fingers as they went along until they came to the break. As the break was at a place that had just been shelled, it goes without saying that it was no particular fun having to go there at all, and certainly no fun to have to linger there, fumbling in the dark with knife and tape until the line had been joined again. Nor was it any fun having to carry out this operation two or three times in the same night, as sometimes happened. The duty was usually performed by two private soldiers, and treated as a perfectly ordinary routine job of work. They got no extra pay for it. But they wore on their sleeves two little crossed flags, the badge of the signaller, and they were rather proud of it. Typical of them was one, Griffiths, who went out so many times mending lines in those grim mountains that he was given a

bar to the Military Medal he had won for doing the same thing earlier in the campaign.

They had developed their own particular little tradition within the larger one of the battalion. At all costs, communications must remain open. So you will generally find that in all battalions there is invariably a special word of praise for the devotion and gallantry of their signallers.

You picked up the 'phone to pass an important message. A polite voice from the signal exchange told you that the line to Charlie Company was cut. You put the telephone down and probably cursed. Twenty minutes later the same voice called you back and said: 'Through to Charlie now, sir, shall I get them for you?' You said yes, and you seldom thought of the signallers who had been out in the blue during those twenty minutes.

Thus Tom vanished into the night. Then he reappeared about half an hour later. 'Through to all companies now, sir,' Tom said. Nobody thought anything of it. They just said 'Good' or 'Thank God for that' and went on with what they were doing.

The second week was passing more quickly than the first, as the second week of anything always does. Life had resolved itself into that deadly sameness which is the hardest thing of all to bear in war. A sustained emptiness of dull repetition, relieved only by spasms of danger, and the dread that goes with it. The same old thing day after day. The same small dull things happening time after time. And at night the fear of counter-attack.

We went through the desolate procedure known as 'Stand to' every morning at dawn—when everyone mans his alarm post as a precaution against dawn attack. Then we shaved in the collective half-inch of water. Then we ate two sausages and two pieces of bread. Then the 'phone would start buzzing. Baker Company to say they were being mortared from the Monastery. So Harry would shell

the Monastery. Sergeant Mucky reporting that the Ghost Gun fired a burst at 10.20: Boche replied with two machine-guns and seven rounds of mortar. Brigade headquarters on to say some return hadn't been sent in. Able Company on to ask if they could have a hundred sandbags sent up that night. Dog Company on to say they'd had three casualties, one serious.

You tried the various standard methods of escape in turn. You read a little. Then you wrote a little. Then you played cards. Some played cards without ever stopping. There was always sleep, of course, the soldier's greatest friend. But if you went to sleep somebody immediately wanted you. So you tried a change of atmosphere. You wandered into the R.A.P., in the next 'room.' The R.A.P. was a great help, apart from its medical aspect. It was always a sort of social centre. A place to visit. Although it was a horrible, squalid little room, identical with the command post, it was different, therefore you could make quite an event out of paying it a visit, and having a gossip with the doctor and the padre, who lived in it with the medical orderlies. It was usually refreshing mentally to get in with the doctor and the padre—'Body and Soul' as they used to be called—for an odd half-hour. Because they were not directly concerned in the military plans and routines, it was rather easier to get away from the incessant talking of 'shop' when you were with them.

It would have been a lot easier, of course, if there had been a time limit on our stay. You can endure anything if you know when it is going to end. But as yet we had no inkling of how long we were to hold that position. We had no hint at all of what lay ahead. Whether we would be relieved by others, or whether we should be ordered to assault the Monastery. It was obvious that something must be brewing. And it seemed reasonably certain that no major offensive would now be attempted until the weather had settled. It was a fairly safe bet that having

reached this stage of the year, nothing big would start until May, the month of blossom and blood-baths. But we were still only half-way through April. All we knew was that in the meantime we had to stick where we were and resist any attack that might be made against this precarious mountain bridgehead the division was holding.

When the padre said: 'To-morrow is Easter Sunday,' people just said: 'Oh, is it?—That means we've been up here a bloody fortnight.'

Easter is a gift to the front-line chaplain. The agonies of the first Easter cannot fail to suggest innumerable close and local analogies when soldiers have to fight at Easter-lide.

The last time it was Easter we had spent Palm Sunday bivouacked on the slopes of a Mount of Olives in Tunisia. On Easter morning we had been in a grove that couldn't have differed very much from the Garden called Gethsemane. We had been fighting then without a break for five and a half months. The campaign had still to be won. The great battle of Longstop was just about to be fought. And Gough Cooper stood in the garden that was like Gethsemane and began his sermon to a congregation of battle-weary soldiers, whose greatest test was still to come: 'How long, O Lord? How long?'

This year the Easter morning service must be held in the shade of the ugly peak that was still putrid with the smell of decaying bodies of the men who had died in its capture. It was inevitable that Padre Stevenson would call it Golgotha. It shouted out to be called Golgotha.

It started like any other morning, this Easter Sunday. It started with 'Stand to.' You are just as likely to be attacked at dawn on Easter Sunday as you are at any other dawn. There was no shooting, however.

Shortly after seven there was a message from Brigade. It said that in view of it being Easter Sunday, it had been decided that no weapons were to open fire from our side during the day, except in the event of an emergency.

Ironically, from the same source, about an hour later another signal came. It said that Intelligence had strong reason for believing that an attack was going to be launched by the Boche from the northern end of Cassino town during the morning. The highest degree of alertness must be maintained!

We didn't open fire that morning. Nor did the Germans. And because it was the first morning we had had free from the noise of gun-fire, the silence was the more impressive—as when ships' engines stop. Stevenson took the Church of England service in the shadow of the hill he called Golgotha. Ward celebrated Mass further down the terraced slope, in a small clearing where the mules were unloaded every night. The Germans most probably had their Easter services too. They were better off for accommodation. They could hold theirs in the Monastery.

They didn't, in fact, put in an attack that day. And no shot was fired by either side.

The Ghost Gun was a great success. It gave the machine-gunners a new interest in life. Every day it fired its teasing little bursts at the Monastery windows. And the rising tide of the Herrenvolk's irritation was clearly revealed by the increasing weight of stuff they were throwing back at it whenever it fired. The first day they didn't bother very much. They replied, but only to the extent of a burst or two from one of their own machine-guns. By the fourth day they were beginning to look for it in earnest. Every time it fired they searched the ground very thoroughly with anything up to six guns. Finally, they honoured it with a royal flush from two of their mortar batteries.

Sergeant Mucky kept a careful log of the number of rounds they wasted on it. The figures were quite impressive, and very gratifying, as the Boche, like ourselves, also had to carry all their supplies up a tortuous mountain

track to the Monastery, and as with us, men had to carry it from there to their forward positions.

It became very famous, our Ghost Gun. Mainly because there was little else in the daily dreariness on which the atrophying mind could fasten. It assumed a gigantic importance. Everybody got to hear about it. The whole battalion followed its adventures with breathless interest. Its fame spread beyond the unit. People rang up from other units and said: 'Tell us about the Ghost Gun. We want to have one, too.' Visiting generals would say: 'How's the Ghost Gun? Jolly good idea!' Then they'd roar with laughter.

Last night there was a variation in the usual calls for artillery fire. It was the slow, dry voice of Stuart, commander of Dog Company, four hundred yards from the Monastery.

'There seems to be a bit of a party on in the Monastery,' Stuart said.

'The Boche are singing "Lilli Marlene." It sounds as if the monks may have left some Benedictine behind. Can you do anything about it—my chaps can't get any sleep?'

He added that the singing was coming from the northern block of the building.

Harry, who had been busy sharpening his pencils and re-marking his map—which he did all day long—went through his customary little facial gymnastics: his eyes shot up to the ceiling, his lips moved in rapid calculation. In Harry's romantic language the singing must be taking place in dangerous proximity to Mike Fourteen and Freddie Seven. Harry then picked up the mouthpiece of his wireless and engaged the Gunner colonel in earnest and appealing conversation. Then he rose to his feet, flushed with triumph, and informed us that Higher Authority was entering into the spirit of the thing. In a very short time the music in the Monastery was to be augmented by

salvoes from four medium and two field regiments! A minute or so later the valley was rent by a shattering series of crashes as the mediums sent their great shells racing to the concert.

'The concert appears to have come to an end,' reported the slow, dry voice of Stuart two minutes later.

There was still no talk of a relief: no hint of an attack. A state of utter timelessness now prevailed. There were no Mondays or Fridays or Sundays. There were not even any days and nights. There was just light and dark. The light was good because it meant comparative safety and rest. The dark was bad because it meant no safety, no rest, and it hid the danger. The dark always brought with it the fear of counter-attack.

The other world, the world of women and shops, music and streets, churches and harlots, no longer existed. It was something we'd once read about in a book. The only world was *here*. And the only time was *now*. There was no past, present or future. There was only *now*. We'd always been here and we always would be.

It hadn't even got a name, this world of ours. A part of it was described on the map as Monte Majola. But never once was it ever called by that name. The soldiers afterwards spoke only of when they were 'at Cassino' or 'up by the Monastery.'

Our minds as well as our bodies were completely confined. The Ghost Gun, 'Lilli Marlene' in the Monastery, an extra cup of tea, the funny thing Corporal Smith said—these were the headlines in our world. Nothing else was real. Not even the rest of the war. We read about the Anzio beachhead and the battles of the Russian armies with the same detachment as the newspaper reader in an English country village. They meant nothing to us except a lot of confusing little black arrows on maps, which you found with other unimportant things in English news-

papers. The only war that existed for us was that between ourselves and the Monastery Germans. And even this, our own personal war, had no clear-cut dramatic identity. It was a phase of one of the great battles of the war. But it never occurred to any of the soldiers that this was so until they read about it afterwards in the papers.

When men are undergoing a great strain, and it begins to wear them down, they must have a moon to reach for. This need was fulfilled by the city of Naples. Naples was the nearest embodiment of the Other World. It became the symbol of every man's immediate aspirations. It was a fairyland of silver and gold and great happiness. It became a fixation. To go to Naples was the most wonderful thing that could happen to you. In Naples you could buy things in the shops; you could get drunk; you could have a woman; you could hear music.

'I'd give anything to have two days there,' one would say.

'I wish I had a cushy job there,' another would reply.

'Christ! I'd like to change places with old George! What a job! Military police in Naples!'

'Nothing to do but ride about in a bloody jeep all day inspecting brothels.'

Everyone wanted to get to Naples. The officers and the men. Anyone who had just come from there became invested with glamour.

What was it like? Was it still full of Americans? Could you get a good meal there now? Were the shops good? Anything good to send home? Fantastic prices? Bugger the prices! It's ages and ages since we bought anything in a shop. If it's nice we'll have it.

Then the conversation would broaden. From 'I wish I had a base job in Naples' to 'I wish I had a base job.' It is the infantryman's safety-valve.

'Why are we such mugs as to be in the sodding Infantry?'

'Damned if I know.'

'Think of all the other bloody things we could be in, and we have to be in the Infantry.'

'I couldn't agree with you more.'

'We could be R.T.O. in some tiddling little village somewhere, or have a nice staff job and sit in an office in Algiers doing sweet Fanny Adams all day.'

'Baggage officer in Bari would suit me down to the ground.'

'I'm not sure Welfare isn't the racket to get into.'

'What about Adjutant at an officers' rest camp in Capri?'

'I'd be quite content to do my soldiering in Cairo, miles from the bloody war, and bathe at the Gezira every afternoon.'

'And here we are in the bloody Infantry!'

The talk would then turn to the other services.

'I wish I was in the Air Force. Admittedly they live dangerously. But their operations only last a few hours, and then they come back to a nice civilized base. They have a hot bath, a pretty little W.A.A.F. serves them with breakfast, and in the evening they can take their girl out to dinner.'

'Oh, I don't know. It must be bloody awful getting a bomber back through heavy flak with two of the engines out.'

'Absolutely bloody. I agree. But you do get a hot bath at the end of it and a nice meal. You don't have to stay up there for days on end.'

'Personally, I'm all for the Navy. You've got your own comfy cabin, and you can always be clean and civilized.'

Then the conversation would work its way back to Naples again. Or an unpleasantly close shell would bring it to an abrupt close.

There was no bitterness in this talk. It was self-mockery rather than self-pity. Nobody meant a word of it. It was a standard comedy that was performed with few variations

almost daily. Everyone knew the dialogue inside out, and could play any of the parts. It was a convenient way of letting off steam, when the effect of the strain of intermittent combat, and monotony, and the lack of proper food, rest and hygiene really began to be felt. And everyone, now, was feeling the strain.

Not that the casual visitor from the other world would notice it. It is put away, when visitors come, because it is something personal and intimate within a unit: something as personal and intimate as a man's religion or his relations with his wife. But it is there if you know where to look for it. You can see it in the eyes. You can see it in the aged look on young faces. You can detect it in the excessive laughter that is accorded the thinnest joke. It is in the over-deliberate understatement with which dreadful happenings are retold.

But the chances are that as a casual visitor you would notice none of this. You would go away and say: 'Yesterday I visited the so-and-so's near Cassino. They insisted that I stay for lunch. They were in very good heart. What a cheery lot they are! Amazing how these chaps stick it!'

One thing only would probably puzzle you. As you rode back to *your* world you might wonder to yourself: 'What on earth makes them so struck on an awful, filthy place like Naples?'

We have got a new toy! It has become a favourite overnight, and is the main topic of conversation. It is a gun—but no ordinary gun. Even Harry, loyal to his precious twenty-five-pounders, admits that it is no ordinary gun.

Yesterday morning Harry returned from Brigade with the information that we were now being supported by a battery of American eight-inch howitzers. One of these giants was ready to shoot on our sector when we required it.

John lost no time in inviting it to fire. As we have hinted before, John loved having the Artillery fire at things.

He couldn't have enough guns. The more guns the merrier. The Boche must be battered day and night. Don't give them a moment's peace. Whether you are defending or attacking, keep on hitting them. Naturally, he couldn't wait to get the new giant into action. A gala opening shoot was arranged for four o'clock that afternoon. The target—of course—was the Monastery.

The first shell came over right on time. It didn't scream or whistle or whine or tear silk like lesser shells. It made a most appalling, sizzling noise rather like the sound water makes going down the waste-pipe of an old-fashioned bath. It hit the Monastery Hill with a sickening thud and exploded with a shuddering crash a fraction of a second later. Its fuse had a slightly delayed action, which enabled it to penetrate first and then explode. It flung rocks and rubble so far and wide that men in our forward positions had their shelters showered with it.

Roars of applause hailed this first round.

'It's a good gun,' Harry said in a professional voice, determined not to be carried away. 'The shell weighs three hundred and fifty pounds!'

John was beside himself with joy. Here was a plaything after his own heart! Somebody christened the gun Horace, and the name stuck. To say that Horace fired a shell is to give an inadequate impression of what that gun did. It gave birth to shells with an almost despairing clap of thunder, as if it would die in the process. Every shell seemed the product of a long and agonized gestation.

This morning Horace got down to serious business. He was ranged carefully by one of our O.P. officers on to one or two favourite spots in the Monastery area. And as each area was registered the readings for that shot were recorded and Harry added another entry to the catalogue of hittable places on his map-board. The soldiers cheered every round. If Horace did nothing else, he certainly sent morale soaring.

Lofty brought the Havildar (Indian Sergeant) in at cocktail hour. Lofty is an immense, blond young officer from Blackburn. He is the possessor of the only grin I have ever known which does, in fact, stretch from ear to ear. Officially he was our pioneer officer—our expert on mines and booby-traps. Unofficially he turned his hand to anything. One of his chief duties at present was to organize the unloading of the mules when they arrived each night and supervise the sorting of the different company loads, so that everything got to the right place, and the mules got away with the minimum delay. In the course of this work Lofty saw a great deal of the Indian porters who took the loads up to the companies. The Indian porters took a great fancy to Lofty and presented him with a turban. He was frightfully proud of it, and wore it all the time. It couldn't have suited him less. But nothing, not even a shell, could induce him to wear anything else.

Lofty and the Havildar in charge of the porters became great friends. Lofty brought him into the Hovel at cocktail hour, because that was an appropriate time for the Havildar to do his trick. The trick consisted in downing half a pint of gin in one. Lofty said he'd seen it happen. Someone challenged the claim. So Lofty brought the Havildar in to prove it.

The Havildar turned out to be a mild-looking old gentleman with white hair, a white beard and a kindly brown face. His name was Abdullah. He had been in the Indian Army for years. He'd fought in the last war. He resented not being allowed to fight in this one as well. He regarded his present job—dangerous enough for most people—as cissie stuff, and a distinct come-down for a fighting man.

'Give me rifle, Sahib,' he'd say wistfully, 'and I go kill same as other war.'

We gave him a drink instead. We happened to have a fair amount of Italian gin. This wasn't a shadow of the

kind of gin one was brought up on, but it was better than no gin at all. A tumbler was filled and passed to Abdullah. He gulped it down in about two seconds, just as if it had been water. It didn't have the slightest effect on him. A remarkable man, the Havildar.

Most of the killing you do in modern war is impersonal. A thing few people realize is that you hardly ever see a German. Very few men—even in the Infantry—actually have the experience of aiming a weapon at a German and seeing the man fall. There is a lot of loose talk about the use of the bayonet. But relatively few soldiers could truthfully say they had stuck a bayonet into a German. It is the threat of the bayonet and the sight of the point that usually does the work. The man almost invariably surrenders *before* the point is stuck into him.

With modern weapons of war, this impersonal killing has become quite a scientific business.

The only way you can hit the enemy when you are not actually attacking him is to subject him to what the military text-books, with nice understatement, call 'Harassing Fire.' Preparing the nightly harassing plan was therefore one of the first tasks of the day. John used to do it every morning immediately after breakfast, with Harry and myself in attendance.

It was like writing a new score each morning for the same orchestra of guns. We had a good range of instruments to play with—Harry's twenty-five-pounders, their big brothers, the mediums (5·5 inch), and of course the fabulous eight-inch Horace. There were Taffy's medium mortars, and behind them some batteries of heavy mortars. And there were the Vickers machine-guns. It was an orchestra well worth composing for. Our scores had more in common with the modern Russians than they had with Tchaikowsky. But at least they were all different. Each was a separate composition, so that our paratroop

opponents should never be able to guess what form the nightly concert was to take.

In this respect we claimed a superiority over the Herrenvolk. It has always been one of their weaknesses to be too regular in their habits, so that you could generally detect the pattern of their plans fairly quickly.

For instance, they always had a morning 'hate' soon after dawn, and an evening 'hate' at dusk, when they would systematically plaster all our positions in turn. Their heavier guns tended to work to a simple schedule. Sometimes they'd shell you at ten in the morning and four in the afternoon for two or three days running. So that you could soon develop a sense of when it was wise to go for a walk and when it wasn't.

The paratroops, however, were less true to type than usual, and they, too, appeared to be going to quite a lot of trouble to vary their design for killing. Except for the morning and evening 'hates,' which are evidently too deeply ingrained in the German character. These were carried out with meticulous regularity.

So we'd gather round John's little table after breakfast and do our daily composition. Sometimes we'd pile the weight into the early part of the evening and have a concentrated *fortissimo* from everything. Another time it would be an *andante* spread through the night, with *presto*s thrown in at irregular intervals. Or we'd warm them up early on, and then ease off so as to lull them into a feeling that it was going to be a quiet night. Then at five in the morning, when sentries tend to be a little drowsy, and the human spirit is at its lowest ebb, we'd unloose everything.

Horace had a special place of honour in these orchestrations. He was the soloist: Our special box-office attraction. When the outline plan had been decided upon Horace was fitted in.

The Monastery was by no means the chief target. It

was never neglected, of course, because it was the headquarters, and concealed many machine-guns and mortars. But there were many other tender spots we had now come to know like the back of our hand, although we only knew them from the maps and air photos. There was the little hollow known as Kidney (because of its shape on the map), in which some persistent mortars lurked. There was the back of Point 445, and a string of posts to its right and left. There was the long black snaky herring-bone on the map which we called Mortar Gully, where several mortar batteries were located.

All these were included in the nightly programme. But above all, we went for the mountain tracks and passes, where we knew their ration parties had to walk. For, like ourselves, they had to send their supplies to the forward positions on the backs of men. We poured shells all along the routes the German mules and porters had to take, for in this kind of battle, if you kill one man carrying food, the chances are that half a dozen riflemen will go hungry the next day. So we didn't mind so much about the riflemen. We simply added to the general bloodiness of their situation by dosing them every so often to keep them awake. The ones we tried to kill were the ones carrying the food. They were the ones to kill. And they did exactly the same to us. With one important difference. We had many more shells. Our hungry guns could be replenished every day without fail. Expense was therefore no object. We could pour out shells to our hearts' content. The Boche were not in this position. They had the shells. But the Mediterranean Air Force went out every fine day and ranged up and down the roads and railways, bombing and strafing. So that hundreds of their shells never reached the guns. The result was that while we killed many of their men carrying food (we had evidence of this later) they killed relatively few of ours.

This fire-fight went on day and night, but chiefly at night.

And in the long and boring intervals the mind would sometimes ponder the strangeness of this mountain battle.

These men of the 1st German Parachute Division were old friends of ours. We'd fought against them in Sicily. We'd fought them again on the Italian Adriatic coast. One of their intelligence summaries had once described us as the best British division. There was no doubt about their being the best German division we had met. And here we were again, locked in this incredibly difficult combat in which a third, perhaps, of our energies were devoted to fighting each other, and two-thirds to fighting nature. For the battlefield here was the common enemy of both sides. And both sides knew that this defensive battle could not last for ever. Soon the weather would break. The rains would end. And there would be a final show-down.

In the meantime we knocked hell out of each other for all we were worth, night and day.

The Americans were delighted that Horace was so popular with us. In due course a signal came through that the American battery commander who owned Horace would be coming up to spend a day in our O.P. and carry out some shoots from it. He was expected to arrive that night. Around midnight Brigade 'phoned up and said: 'Your American guest has just checked in here. He appears to have nearly had it. We've advised a short rest and a drink. Then we'll bring him on up to you.'

He was a tall, pale major. He wore those fragile-looking rimless spectacles which America appeared to adopt as soon as the rest of the world adopted America's horn-rims. Like all other men making the mountain ascent for the first time, the major required a minute or two of repose before his powers of speech returned to him.

We gave him a drink. And when he seemed reasonably composed again we broke the news that his climbing was not yet at an end. It would be necessary for him to go up

to the O.P. in just over two hours to get there before dawn, as it could not be approached in daylight. He smiled weakly and said nothing surprised him any more. He was quite resigned to climbing for ever. Harry then went into a huddle with him, and explained the artillery set-up in detail. Listening to their technical chatter, it was amusing to compare their respective Artillery slang. A British gunner never talks about 'firing a few rounds.' He announces that he is going to 'slap a few on the deck' or 'put one or two on the floor.' American gunners, too, have their picturesque way of paraphrasing their lethal intentions. When the American wished to say that he was looking forward to firing some shells at the Germans from our O.P., what he actually said was that he was looking forward to 'slinging some hot ivy at those God-damned Krauts.'

The major got to work soon after breakfast. He was registering Horace on to some new places. His fifth round landed plumb on top of the southern wing of the Monastery. The effect was catastrophic. Stones and debris were cascaded into the air, and dust and rubble poured out of the windows like thick smoke. Both our other O.P.s excitedly came through on the 'phone to give graphic eye-witness accounts of the spectacle.

The importance of this shot was that it had landed on *top* of the building. Our other guns, because of their flatter trajectory, could not do this. They could batter away at the walls of the building. But they couldn't land on top. Horace, being a howitzer, sent its huge shells high into the air, so that they descended steeply on to their target.

This was another trick for us to play on the Herrenvolk. The future role of Horace in the nightly harassing concerts was settled!

There was no stopping the major after this success. He decided to make a job of the Monastery—working his

way systematically along the top of it in twenty-five-yard lifts.

This was excellent from our point of view. Hitherto we had been rationed to ten shells a day from Horace. (A shell economy was now in force, to build up stocks in readiness for future events.) But the major was in no mood for shell economies. He plugged away steadily till the late afternoon, by which time he had planted exactly forty-three shells on the building. In his own words, he'd 'churned the bastard up plenty.'

In the evening, before he left us, the major said there was one thing he wanted to ask. Why was the name Horace conferred on his gun? It was just an affectionate nickname, we explained, such as the British soldier is always quick to give to inanimate objects that take his fancy.

The major shook his head slowly. 'I don't get it!' he said.

We discovered later that the crew of the gun ('the boys,' as the major used to call them) had a name for it too. It was painted on the side of the barrel in six-inch letters. It was 'BELCHING BITCH.'

Jenkins died at twenty to five on his way to the latrine, as they were shouting that tea was ready. Two haphazard rounds of mortar whistled from nowhere, and the second one landed at the feet of Jenkins. Two others saw it happen. Otherwise it would not have been possible to tell that it was Jenkins until the identity discs were examined. The mortar bomb landed right at his feet.

The day had been quiet. Nothing had been fired at us since midday. It had been a peaceful afternoon. Hardly a soul had stirred out of his shelter. They had all been sleeping, or playing cards, or writing letters, or just arguing. Jenkins had been on duty in the shelter that contained the Signal Exchange. Then they'd shouted that tea was ready,

and on his way to get it Jenkins decided to walk over to the latrine, and then the two casual mortar bombs landed, and afterwards it was just as quiet as it had been before.

The death of Jenkins upset everyone for quite a while. Men spoke more softly, moved more quietly for quite a time afterwards. Hardened as we were, everyone felt bad about Jenkins going like that.

It is always like that with a solitary death. The death of one always affects you more strongly than the death of many. It is strange that it should be so, but it is. Perhaps it is because, when many are dying, the implicit tragedy is generalized, and becomes less personal, so that you come to take it in your stride. Besides which you are so close to it yourself at such times that you have no time to stop and think about what is happening all around you. But when death singles out one individual it is different. The underlying tragedy and futility of the whole is crystallized and concentrated in the tragedy of the single being.

It seemed pretty hard that Jenkins had to die so unnecessarily. He'd been wounded twice before. The first time, we had been wounded together. He had been hit in the bottom, and I remember that as we bumped our way back across North Africa in a succession of ambulances, we had cheered each other up by making jokes about him being hit in the bottom. In Sicily he had been wounded again. It really did seem as if Fate had a personal grudge against Jenkins. And so he died on his way to the latrine, just as they were shouting that tea was ready.

His personal effects lay on the table in the Hovel. There was a cheap wallet, such as you can buy from the street-vendors in any Italian town. There was a crumpled Air Letter he had started to write home, which began, 'Dear Mum and Dad and all at No. 14 . . .' There were a few photographs, including a coloured one of himself and a girl: some pictures of Pompeii he had picked up on leave: and his pay book, which showed that his pay was five

shillings a day, of which he allowed his mother one and ninepence.

They buried Jenkins the same evening, and the padre read the burial service. The Pioneers made a fine cross to put on the grave. They spent a long time working on Jenkins's grave, and when they were at last satisfied with it they collected a number of white stones of equal size and made a neat border round it.

When the right-hand company reported two green Very lights no one paid very much attention. Sentries were always reporting lights. Sometimes the lights were there and sometimes they weren't. Being a sentry sounds simple enough, but it is one of the most thankless and wearing duties of the infantryman. For two hours at a stretch he must strain at the darkness with his eyes and his ears. He is alone with the dark, the cold, and his thoughts. Unless you have done it, you cannot imagine how slowly the two hours drag themselves out. It is possible, especially when you have had a long spell in the line, to see lights which aren't there. In any case, Very lights are relatively commonplace. They are a routine item in the front-line night.

Then there was a clatter of machine-gun fire from the direction of the right-hand company. Not the random bursts that both sides exchanged every day and every night but a purposeful and sustained fire from several guns. Three minutes later the company reported that Point 593 was being attacked. This was one of the key hills. The Northamptons and ourselves held the near side of it: the Boche were on the other slope. It was a pretty congested hill. Neither side had to travel very far to attack the other.

Being attacked by night is particularly unnerving because you cannot tell if there are twenty of the enemy or a whole battalion. If two machine-guns can infiltrate through your positions and open fire from behind, the most dogged temperament finds it hard to resist the impression that it is

surrounded. We had ourselves on several occasions successfully employed this technique and taken a large number of prisoners at the cost of very few casualties.

There was nothing for it but to 'Stand to' and await developments. There were no further signals. There was a great deal of firing, and a good many flares and Verys were going up. It might be the start of an offensive—or it might be a fighting patrol. At any moment we expected to hear our machine-guns get to work—if it was a big attack they would be bound to go for the ridge overlooking us. Messages were flashed to the mortars and the guns to stand by ready to bring down fire on all the S O S targets. The tension of total alertness temporarily eclipsed one's tiredness. Nobody spoke, unless it was to pass a message on the telephone or the wireless. You just stood or leaned or sat motionless—and fancied you could hear your heartbeats.

Then the firing seemed to die down slightly—or was it that you wanted it to die down? No, it was definitely easing off. Nobody said anything, but everyone simultaneously sensed the easing of the tension. People began to talk again. They made the rather forced little jokes which always follow a period of fear. We still had no idea whether the attack had been made by twenty or two hundred. Twenty minutes later we heard that it had in fact been made by twelve men. One of them had been wounded and taken prisoner. He said it was a fighting patrol of twelve. Its object had been to get a prisoner. One suddenly felt very, very tired.

Light followed dark and dark followed light, and we were resigned to holding the position for ever. The domination of the Monastery was now complete. It dominated every thought, every hope, and every fear. It was no longer the symbol, but the embodiment of resistance. The men who defended it became less and less important. It was the Monastery itself that was now the enemy. The

very word ran through every conversation with the tireless rhythm of the wheels of a train. The Monastery . . . The Monastery . . . The Monastery . . . You couldn't get away from it. It possessed the imagination, it infected every mood, it tugged at the senses with the constancy of gravity.

And then, one night, a single short word was whispered, and it was like the first pin-prick of light which brings the end of a long tunnel into view.

The word was first spoken by a man who had just reported back from hospital. It flashed round like a sound-wave, and soldiers smiled when they heard it. It was repeated by the quartermaster who came up later the same night. It was repeated by the officers who brought the mules up. It was all round the division. Rumour, admittedly. But good rumour, said the men who visited us from the other world. The following morning it was officially confirmed by the brigadier.

The word was 'Poles.'

PART THREE

'You Will Hand Over . . .'

IT WAS at the end of the fourth week that we heard officially that we were being relieved by the Poles within a few days. Their advance party arrived the same night.

The first reaction, when you know you are to be relieved, is simple, straightforward joy. You feel an overwhelming affection for the people who are going to relieve you. Never in all your life have you been so pleased to see anybody. You cannot do enough for them. Good old Poles!

The second reaction, when the initial excitement has cooled down, is to realize clearly and fully for the first time what an appalling experience you have been having. While the ordeal is being endured, you cannot afford the luxury of being too conscious of it. You divert your mind from dwelling on the matter by absorbing it with routine duties or deflecting it with trifles magnified to a fantastic degree of importance: the Ghost Gun, the American major's visit, the Havildar swallowing half a pint of gin.

You conquer the abnormal by the simple device of treating it as if it were normal. That is the secret. You must never acknowledge that abnormality exists. Once you do the whole structure of morale is bound to collapse.

The soldier becomes less conscious that he is living in an insect-ridden cave by filling it with photographs and pin-up girls, and labelling it the Ritz. You have a religious service or a haircut, and go to a lot of trouble to pretend not to notice when shells start coming over—as if it were the most natural thing in the world for shells to arrive in the middle of a religious service or a haircut.

The padre was subconsciously stating this truth when he said to me one day: 'It's rather extraordinary. I find I have just written in a letter to my wife, "We celebrated Holy Communion to-day: there were no casualties!"'

We have all laughed at the legendary Englishman, alone in the jungle, who dressed for dinner every night. The laugh is on us. The man knew what he was about.

It is not until the ordeal is over and someone says: 'Well done. You've nearly finished now.' It is not until then that your mind relaxes, and for the first time you are really conscious of how intolerable your lot has been. And you are quite astonished.

We paired off with our opposite numbers in the Polish advance party and showed them round, as the Gurkha officers had shown us round four weeks before. During the day we described the complex administrative set-up. At night we took them round the battle positions. We got along very well together, though they could never wholly conceal their slight impatience with our attitude. They hated the Germans, and their military outlook was dominated by their hate. Their one idea was to find out where the nearest Germans were and go after them. It was praiseworthy, but often unpractical. They thought we were far too casual about everything because we didn't breathe blind hate all the time. Like many others, they misunderstood this apparent casualness. They didn't perceive that it was purely a matter of temperament. That we were, in fact, as serious as they were. Nor did it occur to them that in a modern war, which depends so much on cool calculation and elaborate and careful planning, ours is the best kind of temperament to have. This was clearly borne out by results. The Poles always had much heavier casualties than we did, largely because of their impetuous way of setting about a battle.

As the Poles spoke very little English and none of us

spoke any Polish, the interpreter they brought with them had to work overtime. The interpreter was a funny little man. He was like a ventriloquist's dummy. Months of interpreting had implanted on his face a set wooden smile of agreeable attentiveness. The expression never varied. He would stand between you and the man you were talking to with his feet apart and his hands clasped in the anxious-to-please fashion of waiters: his head jerking sharply between you from side to side, so that he resembled a puppet watching a tennis match. His job appeared to have deprived him of all capacity for original thought. If you asked him a simple question he was at a loss. His job wasn't answering questions. It was simply translating questions into another language.

It seemed an age since the C.O. of the Gurkhas had stood in the Hovel and explained to John all about the mules, and the difficulty of movement, and the system of medical evacuation. Now John was telling it all to the Polish C.O., with the aid of the interpreter. It was like a new recording of an old gramophone record. And as he was stressing and re-stressing the importance of not allowing daylight movement, there was a sudden swoosh from behind the command post and a crash from the Ridge in front.

'On the machine-guns,' a voice shouted from outside. Then there was another. And another after that. Single rounds, at intervals of about fifteen seconds, were churning up Machine-gun Ridge into a cloud of flying rocks and shrapnel and dust. Concealed by the Ridge from the Monastery, the machine-gunners had been spotted from distant Monte Cairo to their rear. There was nothing they could do but lie in their shelters and take it. Sergeant Mucky telephoned and reported that he'd had one killed and three wounded, one badly. And knowing that he must be in full view of the O.P. that had directed that fire, Sergeant Mucky started to make his way down that precipitous boulder-strewn slope, carrying the one who was badly wounded

over his back, and aiding as best he could the two that could walk. When he had seen the wounded safely in the hands of the doctor, he made his way back to his platoon, and rallied it. It was a greater display of gallant leadership than the bare words convey. Besides giving point to the advice John was giving the Polish colonel, this incident was a sharp reminder that we hadn't finished yet. So we passed into the third phase of reaction that precedes relief. You suddenly felt very impatient. You wanted to get away quickly. Fear, long suppressed, came to the surface. You developed a horrid feeling that having survived all this time, you were going to be caught on the post. Although you hadn't yet physically handed over to your successors, you had handed over mentally. And in that mental hand-over had gone your interest and feeling of a job of work to be done, so that it was twice as hard to sustain your own personal mental discipline.

The relief had reached the so-near-yet-so-far stage. And the last three days dragged and dragged.

The night of the relief was cold and damp, but there was a moon, and that made everything easier. As soon as it was dark the first of the Polish companies filed slowly up from the Bowl, and when it reached the Hovel, a guide placed himself at its head and led it up the Gully past Snake's Head towards the furthest of the forward battle positions. A second company moved up, and disappeared towards Snake's Head. A third followed. The fourth company had the least difficult journey. It was the reserve company. It moved into its positions in the gully where the cook-houses were, and our own reserve company moved gratefully on to the track and headed off towards the valley. The Polish machine-gunners came next, and a corporal took them up to the top of the Ridge, and Sergeant Mucky brought his men down it for the last time. They, too, set off down the track towards the valley. A telephone

message said that the Polish mortars had moved into the positions held by Taffy's mortarmen. Taffy was ordered to move off. The Polish headquarters men arrived at the command post. Group by group they moved in.

John and the Polish colonel sat together. It would be two hours or more before the forward companies could complete their reliefs. There was nothing to do now but wait, and hope fervently that the Herrenvolk hadn't selected this particular time of this particular evening to put in an attack. That is always the big worry during a relief—the possibility of being attacked while you are in the middle of a change-over.

The artillery steadily pounded the nearer German positions during the time the companies were changing over. The object of this was to make a noise that would cover the sound of boots stumbling over unfamiliar rocky paths. This fire was not over-violent. That might have had the effect of arousing enemy suspicions that something was going on. It was just a steady, intermittent noise, to distract the attention of the Boche, and drown the sound of footsteps—though the Poles had taken the additional precaution of pulling woollen socks over the outsides of their boots.

The two colonels hardly spoke. It was an anxious time for both of them, waiting for the companies to report in turn that the relief had been completed. They might have been father and son, for the Polish colonel had white hair and was twice the age of the man he was relieving. Tradition dies hard in the Continental armies, and they find it a little difficult to get used to our idea of having colonels aged twenty-eight. They like their own colonels to have grey hair.

Meanwhile the Boche shelling had been stepped up and most of the stuff was falling on different points along the main track, the track along which the whole battalion had to pass. It had been the same the night before. It looked

as if they suspected something. One of their wireless intercept stations had probably picked up a Polish voice. A strict wireless silence had in fact been enforced by the Poles, and all wireless terminals were being manned by British signallers until the relief of the entire division had been completed. But no security plan is absolutely fool-proof, and it looked as if the Boche had an inkling that a relief was due, judging by the increased weight of their fire and the places on which they were putting it. Four times they hit the track at the spot where the mules were usually unloaded.

The mules arrived, as usual, about eleven. One of our officers brought them up, and he was accompanied by the Polish officer who would be doing the job from the next night onwards. The food and water the mules brought up was for the Poles. When it had been unloaded, the remainder of our own kit was loaded on to them and they were sent off quickly so as to be clear of the area before it was shelled again.

The telephone buzzed. The right-hand company had handed over and was starting back. Twelve minutes later the centre company had handed over and was on its way back. But there was no news from the left company, which was further away than the others and had the hardest relief to do. There was another half-hour of anxious waiting before the left-hand company signalled that it, too, was on its way back. Both colonels relaxed slightly.

The first of our companies appeared from the direction of Snake's Head. The company commander checked in to say that everything had gone smoothly. The company moved off. The second company was close on the heels of the first. We sat back and waited for the last company. And when the last company had gone past, the adjutant picked up the telephone, just as he had done the night we moved in, four and a half weeks ago.

This time the adjutant said: 'Hand-over completed.'

Those of us who were left shook hands with the Poles and wished them luck. While we were doing this the telephone buzzed. A Polish company commander had been killed and a platoon commander wounded. By mortar fire. The Monastery had lost no time in blooding the newcomers.

We hurried off down the track at a good pace to catch up the tail end of the battalion.

The relief itself had been accomplished without a casualty. The problem now was to get the battalion across the valley. Not until the last man of that long file of men, stretched far down the mountain, had reached the safety of the olive groves on the other side of the valley could the colonel finally relax and say to himself: 'Thank God, that's over!'

It became a race against the light. It was well after four o'clock. In less than half an hour it would be First Light. We had to be clear of the far side of the valley before it became light enough for the eyes in the Monastery to begin their daily vigil.

As we hurried down the mountain track the big shells from the German heavy batteries at Piedimonte screamed down on the track with frightening monotony. Sometimes they struck a place we'd recently passed: sometimes a point we were shortly due to reach.

We caught up the column at the foot of the mountain path where the trucks and jeeps used to park. There had been a slight delay, because this was where the different mountain tracks converged on to the main route over the valley. Here the column had run into the battalions of the other two brigades who were being relieved. Here, too, the different returning mule columns were jostling their way into the main track, so that there was a certain amount of congestion. Everyone, men and mules, had only one idea—to get across the valley before daylight. This con-

gestion had temporarily delayed our men, so that we were able to catch them up.

A short way ahead was the notorious Villa Corner, by the barracks, that was only a mocking skeleton of a building. Here the track across the valley joined the road that ran along it into Cassino, a quarter of a mile away.

This was the most heavily shelled place of all. It was the worst of the gauntlets that had to be run that night. We took our place in the continuous stream of men and animals that stretched from far beyond Villa Corner back to our distant rear. Wondering who would be passing the barracks when the next salvo came over. *Someone* had to be.

As we approached the barracks, the men in front seemed imperceptibly to increase their pace. One was not ungrateful. Any moment now. Nothing had come over for nearly ten minutes.

Passing the barracks was like breasting a tape at the end of a race. As we walked on towards the Bailey bridge the eastern sky had turned from black to silver-grey. We were two hundred yards on when the next shells fell on the corner. We wondered who was passing at the time. It seemed to be getting light more rapidly than usual, as it does when every minute of darkness is important. We passed the ditch that was piled with dead men, dead mules and dead vehicles, and came to the point where the road bore left into the straight stretch called the Mad Mile. Leaving the road clear for the transport, we branched right and took the more direct mule track straight across the valley. There was another three miles to go. The morning mist was rising out of the ground, and away to the right it was being thickened up by the smoke-shells which had started to pour into the valley. It was just light enough to pick out the towering outline of Monastery Hill. It was so close and so high that even in the near-darkness you could feel its presence without looking over your shoulder.

As we marched along the track and began the slow, twisting, weary climb on the far side of the valley, the happenings of the past thirty days and nights passed in review through the tired mind like a dream in the half-conscious moments of waking. The first night in the Bowl: waking up in the snow: the Gurkha cemetery with its rows of little boots: the days the water went short: Harry directing guns in white pyjamas: the Brigadier's Balmoral appearing every evening at six: John at his tiny table peering at air photos through a magnifying-glass: John on the 'phone saying he must have more shells: Tom slipping quietly away when the lines were cut: dysentery in a forward post: 'Lilli Marlene' in the Monastery: hearing a cuckoo between bursts of machine-gun when we carried out a special shoot early one morning (I meant to write to *The Times* about it, but forgot): the R.S.M.'s blue jersey: the uncrushable humour of Wilks and Walmsley, princes of batmen: the relays of stretcher-bearers edging down the mountain path with the wounded: the Easter Sunday services: Horace and the American major: Corporal H's head crushed like an egg-shell by a piece of rock from a shell-burst four hundred yards away: mules and smells and rotting corpses: tea that tasted of petrol when the tins got mixed—and always the Monastery silhouetted at night by the phosphoric glare of bursting mortar-bombs.

They marched back from the battle in the way of the Infantry, their feet scarcely leaving the ground, their bodies rocking mechanically from side to side as if that was the only way they could lift their legs. You could see that it required the last ounce of their mental and physical energy to move their legs at all. Yet they looked as if they could keep on moving like that for ever.

Their clothes were torn and ragged. They carried their weapons every conceivable way they could be carried. Every few minutes they would change shoulders or change positions. The heavier burdens, like the Brens and the

mortars, were passed along from one to another. Every man took his turn.

Their bearded faces were black with honourable dirt, and their eyes stared to their front and appeared to see nothing. No one sang or whistled, and hardly anyone spoke unless it was to utter a curse when his rifle slipped off his shoulder. Sometimes a man cleared his throat and spat into the side of the road. Some of them chewed gum.

Where was it the officer had said they were going? Capua? Half of them didn't remember, nor did they care. All they knew was that they were on their way 'out of it.' Sooner or later they would come to some place where there were trucks. The trucks would take them to some other place where it would be peaceful and quiet and they'd be able to have a bloody good sleep. And after they had slept they'd get cleaned up and put on some new clothes and get into a town. It didn't matter which town. Any town would do. Where there were streets to walk in and shops and cafés and women. Above all they wanted women. They didn't necessarily want to sleep with women. They just wanted to be in places where there *were* women. To hear women's voices, and hear them laugh, and talk to them and tease them.

Meanwhile it was just a matter of following the man in front and keeping going.

They never once looked back. They just stared straight ahead with eyes that seemed to see nothing, and kept on following the man in front—some in pain, some asleep on their feet, some choked with sickness, many limping—but all managing to force one foot past the other in that steady, subconscious, mechanical rhythm which is the secret of the Infantry.

The general stood at the junction of the tracks in the olive groves, where the trucks were, and watched the soldiers of his division march in.

When they came to the place where the trucks were an

officer led them off and helped them to drag their leaden bodies into the backs of the vehicles, where they collapsed in sleep. As soon as a truck was filled it rumbled off down the dusty road, taking the sleeping men from the battlefield.

Watching them drag their bodies into the trucks with a final despairing heave that seemed to use up the very last of their strength, one was conscious of the feeling of high comradeship which binds a man with fierce intensity to those with whom a profound and fearful mission has been shared. It is something that can only be known through the moral and emotional purge of battle. It is the fighting man's reward.

When the last of the lorries had disappeared in a long bank of white dust, we got into the car and followed on down the road towards San Vittore. Past the wayside graves and the tangle of telephone cables. The demolitions and the diversions and the gun-lines were still there where they'd been four and a half weeks before. But the personality of the road had changed. A division plants its personality on an expanse of country as surely as a woman imposes her personality on a home. The same signs were in position along the road—the signs that warned you about dangerous curves, places where the road was blown, corners that were constantly shelled. They were all there, but they now bore the crest and colours of the Polish division, and their warnings were in Polish. There are other subtler ways, less easy to define, in which a division projects its own atmosphere. And one was aware of a feeling of not belonging there any more. The road ran through someone else's estate now, and we were strangers. In the four and a half weeks we had lost over seventy officers and men. In any other arm of the service it would be considered a lot for a period of 'doing nothing.'

We slept until the car stopped, and when we woke up we were in a place that seemed to be at once the Elysian Fields and the Garden of Eden. To the left, as far as the eye could

see, were green fields. Green fields like English green fields. They were still wet from the night, and in the morning sunshine they smelt rich and sweet. Along the right of the track up which we had come there was a ridge thick with trees, and below them lay the lines of our tents. There were no guns firing and it seemed unbelievably quiet. We had arrived at a place where it was Spring. In the mountains above Cassino there had been no Spring. It is an experience not easily forgotten—to fall asleep where it is Winter and awake in the Spring.

It would have made a fine ending to the story. Unfortunately, it was only the beginning. We knew that in ten days we had to go back—this time to attack. Nothing had ended. The Monastery would still be there, glowering down upon us. The final great battle for Cassino was about to begin.

PART FOUR

'You Will Attack and Destroy'

ON A sunny afternoon in May Field-Marshal Alexander's Order of the Day was read out to the soldiers before they went for their tea.

"Throughout the past winter you have fought hard and valiantly and killed many Germans.

Perhaps you are disappointed that we have been unable to advance faster and farther, but I, and those who know, realize full well how magnificently you fought among these almost insurmountable obstacles of rocky, trackless mountains, deep snow and in valleys blocked by rivers and mud against a stubborn foe.

The results of these past months may not appear spectacular, but you have drawn into Italy and mauled many of the enemy's best divisions which he badly needed to stem the advance of the Russian armies in the east.

Hitler has admitted that his defeats in the east were largely due to the bitterness of the fighting and his losses in Italy. This in itself is a great achievement, and you may well be as proud of yourselves as I am of you.

You have gained the admiration of the world and the gratitude of our Russian allies.

To-day the bad times are behind us, and to-morrow we can see victory ahead. Under the ever-increasing blows of the Air Forces of the United Nations, which are mounting every day in intensity, the German war machine is beginning to crumble.

The Allied armed forces are now assembling for the final battles on sea, on land and in the air, to crush the enemy once and for all.

From east and west, from north and south, blows are about to fall which will result in the final destruction of the Nazis and bring freedom once again to Europe and hasten peace for us all.

To us in Italy has been given the honour to strike the first blow. We are going to destroy the German armies in Italy.

Fighting will be hard and bitter and perhaps long, but you are warriors and soldiers of the highest order who for more than a year have known only victory. You have courage, determination and skill.

You will be supported by overwhelming air forces, and in guns and tanks we far outnumber the Germans. No armies have entered battle before with a more just and righteous cause. So, with God's help and blessing, we take the field—confident of victory."

It was an impressive Order. The most impressive we ever had. It was both personal and portentous. The 'honour to strike the first blow' sometimes provokes a wry smile from soldiers who will personally be striking it. Men are apt to think it is an honour they would not grudge someone else! The present occasion, however, was different. There was too strong a feeling in the air of the imminence of great events. Everyone sensed that before long other tremendous occasions would be holding the attention of the world. The C.-in-C.'s message therefore had a direct appeal to the pride that was timely, significant and irresistible. While the order was being read out the men stood with their mess-tins in their hands under the trees, and watching their faces you could see that it was getting right home. Though all they said, as they moved away in little groups to get their tea was: 'Oh well, it won't be long now.'

It wasn't. The first blow was struck the following night, Thursday, May 11th, soon after dark, with a cataclysmic bombardment by more than a thousand guns. Under their cover assault brigades of two divisions—one British and one Indian—advanced to force a crossing of the River Rapido. It had started.

We weren't in the first assault, so the opening of the battle was something remote and without reality as far as

we were concerned. We could just make out very faintly the noise of the cannonade fifty miles away—but it was nothing more than a tremulous shudder in the air. It wasn't our time yet. To-morrow, perhaps. To-night we could have another fine sleep in our pleasant green camp near Capua.

We knew the plan. The regrouped Eighth Army, reinforced by the Polish corps, was to attack in the Cassino sector and break into the Liri Valley, which carries Highway Six northwards to Rome. Away to the left the French corps of General Juin, newly arrived from a year's intensive training in North Africa, and with brand-new American equipment, was to advance along the mountain range which flanks the left of the valley. Further to the left still, the Americans were to push up the west coast. At the right moment the British and American divisions at Anzio were to break out of their perilous, four-months-old beachhead and cut off the Germans' line of retreat. There were impressive details about guns and tanks and aircraft, and everything ran into four figures.

And it had started. And we were scarcely giving it a thought. All that really interested us was that we weren't in the first phase. We and the Canadians were in reserve for the first phase. That was what mattered. We weren't in the first phase. So most of the soldiers got under their blankets early, and very few were awake at nine-thirty to feel the tremulous shudders in the air which meant that the offensive had started. And waking up the next morning the first thought was not: 'I wonder how it is going,' but 'I wonder if we'll get another night here.'

Friday morning was uneventful, except that we were put at six hours' notice to move. There was no news of the battle. Not even any rumours. It wasn't our battle yet. As far as we were concerned, there wasn't a war on. And because our hours of rest were numbered, the hillside and the fields seemed especially delightful. Every hour there

from now on was carefully sipped and savoured, like the last drops of a vintage port. We were in the position of schoolboys gloating over the last precious day of the holidays. We might of course be here for several days yet. The initial assault might last a long time. There was no telling.

It was only a fortnight since we had come back from Cassino. Yet already the memory of it was beginning to fade. It was something that happened a long time ago. As with all battle memories, once they have receded into the past, it was the pleasant and amusing things that people were beginning to recall now in their talk—not the horrors. It is always the same. The dreadful occasions are remembered not by their many dreadful hours but by their few amusing moments.

So the soldiers lay in the sunshine by their tents and wrote letters to their wives and mothers and girls saying they were fine and nothing much was happening and there was nothing to worry about. Many had had a few days' leave during the past fortnight in Amalfi and Positano and Salerno and Pompeii and Sorrento, which are as beautiful as their names. There had been daily trips to Naples. There was plenty to write home about. They had liked Naples. They had bought things in the shops, they had strolled up and down the densely packed Via Roma. They had stood at corners and watched people go by. They had eaten in restaurants. They had been swindled by the black market. They had even been to the opera, a thing many would never have thought of doing at home. They had thoroughly enjoyed themselves. So they had plenty to put in the letters they were writing. And they wrote them carefully and spent a long time writing them, as men do on the eve of a battle.

In the late afternoon there was a message. 'No move before to-morrow.' This was wonderful. Another night in bed! Another whole glorious night to be gloatingly

anticipated and luxuriously wallowed in! Another whole night of sleep! To-morrow was a hundred years away.

The next morning, Saturday, the papers in England announced the offensive with a fanfare of headlines. 'ALL-OUT ATTACK IN ITALY' . . . 'GREATEST MASS OF ARTILLERY EVER ASSEMBLED IN THIS WAR' . . . 'AVALANCHE OF SHELLS' . . . '3,000 AIRCRAFT.' These were the phrases which the papers shouted across the breakfast tables in England on the morning of Saturday. But all we heard—barely fifty miles from where it was all happening—was a vague report that the battle was going reasonably well, the sappers had got at least one bridge over the river, and a certain amount of armour was believed to be across. But it was all pretty vague.

Men said, 'That's good,' but what they thought was, 'Oh Christ, that means us pretty soon!' Everyone expected the move order to arrive at any moment. It was an anticlimax when the same message came through as that of the day before: 'No move before to-morrow.' Another night. It was unbelievable.

I was awakened by the noise of a motor-cycle picking its way up the rough track that led into the company area. It is one of the night-sounds the ear is always quick to perceive, even in the deepest slumber. I looked at my watch. It was half an hour to midnight. A dispatch-rider at that hour meant only one thing. Bad news. You learn to dread the sound of a motor-cycle in the middle of the night. The dispatch-rider handed me a message. It said: 'Battalion will be ready to move from present area by 04.00 hrs. Company Commanders conference Battalion Headquarters immediately.' I put a coat on over my pyjamas, and with the familiar just-before-the-race feeling inside, got into my jeep and drove the two miles to Battalion Headquarters.

One by one the others arrived, also with a coat thrown

over their pyjamas, muttering: 'Typical M.F.U.!' (idiomatic Army expression denoting that something has been bungled). We were a sorry-looking collection. The rude awakening, after being told we weren't moving till the next day at the earliest, coupled with a chilly jeep-ride in pyjamas, didn't exactly put one in a gracious or receptive mood for absorbing a lengthy operation order. The whole thing was too melodramatic—like a cheap headline. ('Dramatic midnight conference in pyjamas.') John, however, was expert at soothing ruffled company commanders, and he was ably assisted by some wine—rather above ordinary *vino* standard—which they happened to have at Battalion Headquarters.

'It seems they're across the Rapido all right,' John said. 'The bridgehead is now firm. The idea is to rush 78 Div. up there as quickly as possible, and pass us through to do a left-hook and cut Highway Six beyond Cassino. At the same time the Poles are to try and work round behind the Monastery and cut the road from the right and link up with us.'

There were a lot of details about the move, about the advance party and concentration areas at the other end.

'We've got to be prepared to plunge in almost as soon as we get up there to-morrow.'

We returned to our companies, where controlled pandemonium had broken loose. Trucks and carriers were being backed and shunted near piles of stores, to an accompaniment of shouted orders and curses, and frantic loading was taking place. Two hundred yards away, on the main track, a long line of troop-carriers appeared from nowhere and formed up in readiness.

The petrol-cookers lit up the night with sheets of flame and then settled into a steady red glow and a snarling roar, to have seven hundred men's breakfast ready in little over an hour's time.

As soon as the vehicles were loaded they were marshalled

into position from which they could easily take their place in the battalion column when it moved off.

While this was going on company commanders passed on the orders to the platoon commanders, and when the platoon commanders went away to pass them in turn to the section commanders the company commanders glanced through their notes again and wondered what they had forgotten. Moves are hateful at the best of times, but a quick move in the middle of the night is pure hell.

By ten to four the petrol-cookers that had made the breakfast had been dismantled and themselves loaded. A battalion that had been peacefully sleeping in a rest area four hours before had transformed itself into a completely mobile fighting force. All its equipment was loaded. It had had breakfast. It awaited the signal to move.

The start-point was the junction where the secondary road from the rest area joined Highway Six at the northern end of Capua. A military police control-post was easing the column into the main road. A division on the move is no mean caravan. A time-table as intricate as that of a railway must be imposed and adhered to if the column's two-thousand-odd vehicles are to get to their destination without chaos.

We were in the first flight. We moved slowly down the secondary road, timing our approach so that the leading vehicle would pass the start-point at exactly eighteen minutes past four, which was the time laid down in the move order.

One by one the trucks and the lorries and the carriers swung into the main road and headed north with that ceaseless protesting whine of acceleration which marks the start of a convoy and is one of the unforgettable sounds of war. Then they settled into the steady hum of a constant twenty miles an hour. The division was moving up.

To get an idea of what is involved when a division moves, you must imagine a town of fifteen thousand

inhabitants—Maidenhead, for instance—moving in its entirety to an area fifty or more miles away. Imagine this town being given a few hours' notice to pack into lorries all its inhabitants; the contents of all its shops; its petrol stocks and all mechanical stores and plant; its business and administrative files and records: everything, in fact, essential to its daily existence. Imagine it setting off in its vehicles early one morning, and by the afternoon being established in a new location that is only an expanse of fields: not only established but carrying out its normal work without anyone having gone without a meal.

That is how it is when a division moves.

The troop-carrying lorries that had brought us away from the Cassino mountains two weeks before were taking us back. The soldiers stared out of the backs of them, getting their familiar view, not of the place to which they were going, but of the places they were leaving behind.

The road was a fine one and mainly straight. The convoy kept up a steady twenty to twenty-five miles an hour. Jeeps raced ahead, weaving in and out of the column, gaining three or four vehicles at a time—then suddenly cutting in to avoid something coming the other way. D.R.s roared past with that look of desperate urgency that is in their very appearance.

It was Sunday. But it didn't matter. We had passed into another period when the days don't matter. It was just light and dark again. The division was moving up. To-night we might be fighting. The soldiers thinking the same old thoughts. The 'us again' feeling. The melancholy, bitter-sweet pride. 'They' have found us another job of work. What would 'they' do without us? Thought we'd got a cushy job in reserve. Not bloody likely. Knew it wouldn't be long before we got mixed up with this lot. Where's the rest of the Army? Second front, I suppose. Time that lot was starting an' all. Oh well, what the hell! We've been in every other bloody do, may as well be in this

one too. Wish Maria was coming with us. Wonder what she's doing now? In bed with that bloody base-wallah, I expect. Nice girl, Maria. They get fat, though, these Eye-tie dames.

In all their minds too, like a back-cloth to all other thoughts, was the image of a vast and menacing ruin on the very summit of a grim mountain. The Monastery was getting nearer. Nearer . . .

The division was moving up. Past the great dumps built up during the winter. Dumps of food in tins and boxes. Dumps of shells stacked in neat little pyramids. ('Wish I had a cushy job looking after ammo!' thought some.) Past the bridging dumps where the components of the Bailey were stacked, like a vast meccano set. ('Wish I worked in a bridging dump!') Dumps of the collapsible assault-boats in which armies cross rivers. Vehicle parks thick with Shermans and jeeps. ('Wish I was in a vehicle park.') And a few yards off the side of the road ran the pipe-lines carrying oil and petrol to within a few miles of the front line—the pipe-lines that were always moving forward behind the advance. ('A pipe-line job wouldn't be too bad!')

The division was moving up. There were jeeps leading each group of ten or twelve trucks: jeeps tearing in and out of the column in a frenzied game of cat-and-mouse. Superior jeeps with 'priority' on them and generals in them. Tough American jeeps with names like 'Kansas Kid' and 'The Champ': homely British jeeps invariably called Elsie or Joan or Liz. The ambulances coming back. The inevitable signs warning you about VD, warning you about a dangerous bend, warning you about malaria, pointing the way to the different base units tucked away up the side roads. Our own battle-axe sign with a broad direction arrow at every road junction where a wrong turning might be taken. Traffic control-posts where units are checked through as trains are checked. VD, another

petrol-dump, an overturned peasant cart. An improvised fighter air-field. An unexplained halt, when officers step impatiently out into the road in the protesting way people peer irritably out of carriage windows when a train unexpectedly stops. Then on again.

The division was moving up. Officers sorting and folding the bundles of new maps thrust into their hands just before leaving. The sun well up and the road getting dustier. Everyone completely covered in white dust. Faces like pastry that has been rolled in flour. A straight length of road through an avenue of those wonderful sycamore trees they have in Italy. Sudden swerves to avoid the high, precariously overloaded carts of the peasants that lurch and sway along the verges. The Monastery getting nearer. Wonder if the Poles have had any luck. Wonder how many casualties the other chaps had doing the river-crossing. Bet San Angelo was a sod. Hope to hell we're not rushed into anything to-night without being able to tee things up properly. The Monastery getting nearer.

Another traffic control-post, and dead on time. Like playing trains again. It was fun running to a time-table. Mignano ahead. A bit different from the last time we saw it. That awful mud patch where it rained every day for three weeks before the famous bombing and the New Zealanders' attack. The division was moving up. . . .

Mignano was railhead. Forward of it the railway line—made useless by the Germans in their retreat—had been removed by American engineers and the track had been turned into a road which provided the main approach to the Rapido, three miles south of Cassino. In the cover of its cuttings ammunition dumps had been built up. In the ravines and gullies on either side of it guns and tanks and men had been hidden. Along it marched the Indian and the British soldiers who, two nights before, had forced their way across the Rapido. Now its work was done. The same American engineers who had transformed it from a

railway into a road were busily engaged turning it back into a railway. While it was a road it was called 'Speedy Highway,' and as such it will be one of the well-remembered roads of the Mediterranean campaigns, taking its place with the Messerschmidt Alleys and the Mad Miles. Other engineers were already at work extending the pipe-lines. Mignano's days as a place of military importance were numbered. The battle was moving forward. In a day or two Mignano would become a small Italian village again. Even smaller than it was before, as the shells and the bombs hadn't left very much of it standing.

The convoy droned on. The road began to snake its way through the cluster of hills which, six months before, had provided the Germans with excellent outpost positions for the main Cassino defences.

Soon we should be met by our advance party, sent on ahead to reconnoitre the concentration area. Soon we should reach the point on the road where you get a first distant glimpse of the Monastery. The Monastery! Back again under its spell.

We were well in view of it before we did run into the advance party. They led us up a rough track branching left from the main road, and running along the base of a ridge which sheltered many batteries of guns. Eventually we stopped by a vineyard.

There were several headquarters not far away, but nobody seemed to know anything. There is always a tantalizing lack of information in the early stages of an offensive except to those directly involved, and even they often can't tell you much. The advance party had picked up a few crumbs that were more rumour than information.

'No one seems to know what the hell is happening.' You hear that sentence all the time in the early part of an operation. The advance party told what they knew, which was pretty well nothing.

'... Indians apparently did well ... hear the —shires

caught a packet . . . nobody seems to know a bloody thing . . . Brigade didn't seem to know anything definite . . . Army commander passed along here about an hour ago looking very cheerful, if that means anything . . . lot of prisoners . . . nobody knows a bloody thing . . . usual vagueness . . . apparently it has been foggy down by the river, to make things worse . . . they don't seem to think we'd be wanted before to-morrow . . . quite a few tanks across . . . the Irish expect to move up to-night . . . I don't think anyone really knows . . .'

The cooks were told to get on with the evening meal quickly in case we did have to move on. John went to Brigade to report us in and see if they knew anything yet. The soldiers stood about in little groups waiting for tea. The vehicles were dispersed and turned round ready for a quick move out. John came back from Brigade and said we definitely weren't moving till the morning. The shrill voice of a cook shouted, 'Come and get it!'

There was no other information apart from the fact that we weren't moving till the next day. Still, who cared? We'd know soon enough. In the meantime it was good to have another unexpected night of rest: nice to know that we could at least go into whatever lay ahead of us fresh.

This is the way battles generally start. Seen in retrospect, they have a clear-cut entity—a beginning, a middle, and an end—filling a specific period of time. That is not how it seems at the time. There is seldom a clear-cut beginning. You just go on moving—a stage nearer every move—and no one seems to know anything definite. You may be fighting to-night, and then you don't. You just lie about all day in an olive grove. You're told you're not likely to move for twelve hours, and then you do. And after you have moved from one concentration area to another, and then to another, and an assembly area after that, things suddenly start happening and you're in it. You lose even the vaguest sense of time. You take your objectives and

dig in, and then you go on again, and sometimes you spend two or three days on one of the objectives where you dug in, and others pass through to continue the advance. Some of the days are bloodier than others. Eventually another division passes through and the battle moves far ahead, leaving you where you are, with yesterday's front line as to-morrow's rest area. And you suddenly discover that you have been fighting for ten days or more.

We were in the beginning stage now: the stage of endless moves and no one knowing what was happening. It was Sunday evening. The battle was nearly seventy-two hours old. We weren't moving till morning. We hadn't slept for twenty hours. It had been a hot and tiring journey. Thank God we could bed down early. The fact that a battery of five-fives a hundred and fifty yards behind gave birth every few minutes didn't matter a damn. I have seldom slept better.

The headlines in the English papers were in great heart on Monday morning. 'EIGHTH ADVANCING INTO LIRI VALLEY . . . CASSINO AND ABBEY HILL THREATENED . . . SAVAGE COUNTER-ATTACKS SMASHED . . .' Thus sang the headlines on Monday morning and went on to tell of 'dents punched in Gustav Line' and 'ferocious conflict with Kesselring's crack paratroops.' Three or four miles back we knew nothing of all this in our vineyard.

Soon after five the vineyard became a mass of half-naked men washing and shaving: cooks shouted 'Come and get it!': the five-five guns, which had been firing all night, were still plugging away. We didn't know any more about what was to happen. It is odd shaving in the early morning and not knowing whether you will be fighting later in the day or not. But it is a frequent experience in the early stages of these affairs.

'REINFORCEMENTS STREAMING ACROSS RAPIDO BRIDGES' was another of the Monday morning headlines. About the

time the people in England were reading the headline we were there.

The message gave a map reference and told us to move to it at once, and we moved. The company commanders went on ahead with the colonel so as to be available for immediate reconnaissances. We 'streamed across' in jeeps: the battalion 'streamed across' on foot an hour later.

The route to the river was along a sunken track that led on to the railway-turned-into-road, which in turn led to the Bailey bridge called 'Congo.' All the bridges had a code name, and ours was 'Congo.'

The valley was shrouded in a drifting mist which had a high smoke-content from burning buildings and bridges, and a goodish dust-content from the forward areas, where every tank raised an individual fog. The mist was on our side, as it screened the river and the precious bridges from the view of the Monastery which towered up on our right and looked straight down the valley. It was a patchy, drifting mist, and every so often it would clear sufficiently for the towering mass of Monastery Hill to appear through a haze. And whenever that happened, some shells usually landed somewhere ahead in the middle distance. The Monastery O.P.s didn't waste a second of these brief interludes of clearness.

It was quite a moment crossing the Rapido after all the weeks of staring at it. As the planks, which form the roadway over a Bailey, rattled under the wheels of the jeeps, one thought how strange it is that such a fiddling little river could cause so much bother.

As we crossed the bridge the mist thinned out momentarily. It was as if the Monastery had blown it away and was saying: 'Don't worry, chum, I've seen you. You'll be hearing from me.'

Across the bridge you ran straight into a tangled mass of battle-wreckage, which re-created pretty vividly the scenes of the past three days. A turret some yards from the tank

from which it had been blown; a Bren-carrier on its side, its steel belly torn from one end to the other like paper; the bodies no one had yet had time to bury: the holes where mines had been removed, and the craters and wreckage where they hadn't: and everything was caked in the thick creamy dust churned up by the never-ending line of machines that had passed through. Soon we came to a T-junction where our track ran into a sunken lane that had been a machine-gun and mortar dream for the defenders of the Gustav Line. We were led into a field by the track junction and told to wait. Was this the final assembly area? ('Don't know yet. Just hang on there for the time being.') The drivers threw camouflage-nets over the jeeps and lay down beside them and were instantly asleep. We watched a battalion put on its equipment and move forward. A D.R. came back and said, 'The area's a bit further on. The C.O. wants you to go there.' We awakened the drivers. They pulled the nets off the jeeps and we followed the D.R. up the sunken lane.

There was a stream of traffic edging slowly along it. We crawled past the deep dug-outs the Germans had made in the bank. There were holes which had housed their mortars, and hard by them were dug-outs from which they could fire the mortars in almost complete safety from our shells. There were machine-gun emplacements linked by intricate tunnels burrowed through the heart of the bank. Small wonder that months of shelling hadn't reduced these positions. They'd had to be ferreted out of those holes one by one. Many of them had died in the holes. The road was paved with dead.

About three hundred yards along we passed the lower half of a German. He had been neatly severed at the waist. A tank must have gone over him, though there was no sign of the other half. A pair of trousers with half a man inside them. The neatness of this half-corpsé made it more ghastly than the messy ones.

Almost immediately the D.R. who was leading us turned left up a track that ran straight up a wide re-entrant between two shallow ridges. John met us about five hundred yards along it. 'This is the place,' John said.

'The Northamptons are pushing on right away with tanks. There'll be plenty of room when they've gone. Get the men into those ditches. It will save digging slits.'

The Northamptons were getting ready to move. We went away and looked over our company areas. The Northamptons began to move off—in single file.

'The transport will have to go in there,' Mac said.

'There' was the wide re-entrant between the two ridges. It was about a hundred yards wide. It already contained a mass of stuff. A squadron of Shermans at the forward end: a troop of seventeen-pounder anti-tank guns was lined up by the track ready to advance. Behind them were half a dozen six-pounders. Behind them again a miscellaneous assortment of carriers and trucks. Our twenty-odd fighting vehicles had to be worked into the area too. I went to the least congested part and posted a man there to guide our transport in. A gunner officer ran up and said, 'Are you going to be in here long?'

I said I didn't know. He said he hoped not as he'd got to get a battery of self-propelled guns in there later in the day.

The whole army seemed to want to pile into this area. Vehicles were streaming in steadily. Such congestion would have caused apoplectic fits on an exercise in England.

'Thank God for the mist,' the gunner officer said. 'If the Monastery O.P.s spot this lot pouring over the bridge we've had it.'

I went back to meet the transport. I waited for them at the T-junction near the bridge. The C.O. of an Irish battalion was giving out orders to his company commanders. They too were about to continue the advance

with tanks. The first of our carriers appeared. I led them down the sunken lane past the dug-outs and the dead. No one had yet buried the dead half-German. We had to stop on the sunken lane. With the metallic rattle of a hundred forges, a column of Shermans was approaching from the opposite direction. They wanted to turn into the crowded re-entrant. They were off to a battle, they said, so we waited to let them through. They clattered thunderously up, drowning every other sound with their monstrous din, and as each one skidded round the corner in a series of jerks it lost itself in a cloud of dust that had the colour and the texture of cream. After the first five had gone through you gave up attempting to keep out of the dust. You just stood there and took it.

By midday the battalion had arrived, and D.R.s were on their way back to B Echelon to bring up the cooks' trucks with what might be our last hot meal before the battle.

There was definite information at last. The role of the division was confirmed. We were to go straight through and cut Highway Six as quickly as possible. The Canadians were passing through the Indians on the left, and advancing parallel with us. They were crossing the river further down now. The two bridgehead divisions were fanning out to the right and left respectively and forming a protective corridor for the break-through. Two battalions were already a mile on and in contact.

'We may be committed to-night,' John said. 'Possibly not until to-morrow. It depends how to-day's operations develop. It's pretty certain they won't want to use us before to-night.'

The cooks' trucks arrived with the hot meal and the mail, and graphic accounts of the amount of transport that was moving up. The mist had cleared, but the guns were pouring shells into Monastery Hill in a frantic effort to keep the haze alive. The avalanche of tanks and vehicles of every conceivable shape and size never stopped. The

congestion was fantastic by this time. All semblance of dispersion had long been abandoned. It was now just a question of vehicles squeezing themselves into any space they could find. And as they continued to stream into the area and force their way into the battle queue, one began to revel in the blatancy of it. It was soldiering at its most sophisticated: a casual breaking of rules which only the experienced professional can ever afford to risk. There was a comfortable feeling in the air of 'What the hell! We've done it so often before. It will sort itself out.' This wasn't boastfulness nor was it plain carelessness. It was simply sophistication born of long practice and confidence. It worked because of the easy co-operation of everyone concerned—again born of long practice. It was the right way, one felt, for a victorious army to prepare itself for a new conquest.

It was an afternoon of rest and preparation. For the officers, mainly preparation. The company commanders lay in the ditch that was called Battalion Headquarters, while John carefully outlined plans for every task we might have to undertake. We knew already roughly what we would be doing, but there were possible variations—it was still uncertain, for instance, whether we should be operating by day or night. We had air photos and large-scale maps covering the entire front practically from where we were to Rome. We had them spread out on the ground while John went over the different possibilities in great detail. Harry was back with us for the battle. He was in the ditch, too, at his usual game of sharpening coloured pencils, rubbing marks off his map and putting them in again.

Life had once again simplified itself. We had to get to Highway Six. Just that. Once we'd cut the Highway north of Cassino our life's work would be done. Operational existence is much easier to tolerate when you have a definite clear-cut objective. Once it had been Tunis. All that had mattered for several months was to get to a

promised land called Tunis. There had been many others since then.

The new promised land was a stretch of main road six miles away. One could apply oneself with complete single-mindedness to getting there. What happened afterwards didn't matter a damn. Cutting Highway Six was the only thing that mattered now. Therefore it was much easier to work oneself into a constructive state of mind about the coming battle. One could almost become mildly enthusiastic about it. After all, it wasn't every day that one broke through a complete defence system and cut Highway Six! One of the chief difficulties during the defensive period in the mountains a month previously was the absence of a clearly defined goal. There was no Tunis to capture or Highway Six to cut. It was just a passive state of sustained awfulness.

The Brigadier called while we were having tea and told John it would definitely be the operation he had outlined in the morning. We should probably have to attack an hour before dawn. John told us to be ready to leave in a quarter of an hour on a reconnaissance. We set off soon after six, and were glad to see that it was getting misty again, as most of the journey would be in full view of the Monastery. We followed the route taken by the infantry and the tanks earlier in the day. A quarter of a mile along the winding track we came upon one of the tanks. It was still burning. A hundred yards further on we passed the anti-tank gun that had knocked it out. Sprawled beside the gun were four of its crew, who hadn't lived long to enjoy their success. After fifteen minutes' driving we reached the rear headquarters of the leading battalion. They had had a hard day's fighting and looked pretty tired. They said it was not advisable to take the jeeps any further. It would be better to walk from there. They'd had quite a few casualties, they said. R—— had been killed. R——, who had been right through three campaigns, and was

considered lucky. He was one of the last of the originals who had landed with the division in North Africa. It is always upsetting when one of the old hands goes. It makes the other old hands start wondering how soon it will be their turn.

While we were talking the evening 'hate' started. With their usual punctiliousness in these matters, the Germans were systematically drenching every part of the area in turn with two or three dozen shells. One's appetite for the reconnaissance waned considerably. John said, 'Come on. In twos. Well spread out.' This was a normal precaution on 'recces'—it is inconvenient for a battalion to lose its C.O. and all its company commanders through one shell.

As we made off towards the battalion's tactical headquarters, which was four hundred yards ahead, a violent twittering broke out above our heads, which the uninitiated might have attributed to birds. It was caused, in fact, by showers of machine-gun bullets. The Boche were taking advantage of the flat, undulating country to fire sniping machine-guns at very long range, so that you didn't hear the gun—just the twittering stream of bullets showering down from a great height. One of these had killed Major R——. Most of them were well above our heads. But you never knew for certain. They weren't so easy to judge as shells.

At tactical headquarters the colonel pointed out his forward positions, which were on the slight feature shown on the map as Point 66. He said, 'Be careful: they've been spraying machine-guns about rather a lot.' He showed us a roundabout route which he said would be the safest way to go. We moved fast as it was beginning to get dark. It was difficult country—nothing you could really call a feature. Just an endless vista of undulations, some of which were a little higher than others. The one we were making for was a good six hundred yards away.

We came to the forward company headquarters. We

checked our position with the company commander. Yes, we were making for the right bump, he said. That was Point 66 in front. He had a section on it. 'Be careful,' said the company commander. 'It isn't a good place to wander about.' We moved quickly along a hedge and then bore right and in a few minutes had located the section.

'This will be the forming-up place to-morrow,' John said. 'I think it is dark enough to go on top and look at the start-line. Crawl when you get near the crest.'

'Be careful,' said the corporal commanding the section. 'There it is,' John said. 'Remember those houses on the air photo? See the right-hand house, Geoff? Keep to the right of that house: Mark, you cross between that house and the one on the left of the group. Have a good look. We may have to do this in the dark. Keep well down. The Boche are still in those houses.'

Over to the right and slightly to the rear dancing lights and flashes and muffled thunder in the growing darkness heralded the nightly pounding of the Monastery. The hill was not visible through the mist—only the darting flashes of scores of shells bursting frenziedly all over it. It was strange to be looking *back* towards the Monastery. It showed what progress had been made.

John finished his provisional orders, and we started back. We returned via the main track in order to find out if it was going to be possible to get the wireless jeeps and Bren and mortar carriers along it. It was eight-thirty and dark by the time we got back to the battalion.

'Get everything teed up in case we do have to do it in the night,' John said. 'Then get some sleep. I've got to be at Brigade at nine for the final conference. Don't suppose I shall be back much before eleven. Be somewhere where you can be found quickly in case I have to have an orders conference when I get back.'

There is no rest for C.O.s at these times. No commanders get very much rest with all the preparations within

their companies, and the endless reconnaissances and orders conferences. But C.O.s get least of all.

He got back at eleven and he looked pretty tired. It had been an eighteen-hour day.

'Don't wake the others up. We don't perform till nine, thank God. There'll be time for orders in the morning. I'll have a conference at five-thirty. Better arrange with the guard to wake everybody at five.

'We attack at nine with tanks. The Lancers. It's a nice, gentlemanly hour. Attacks always ought to be at nine, so that you can go into them after a shave and a good breakfast. There's nothing like a good breakfast before you fight. I think I'll get some sleep now. I am tired.' Something definite at last. No more moves. The 'ifs' and the 'maybes' finished with. 'To-morrow at nine . . .'

The guard didn't have to wake us at five. Chilly dawn and a brisk shower of rain proved equal to the task. It was wet and cold and misty when John laid his maps and his notes on the flat bonnet of his jeep, and gave out final orders for the battle. All the familiar phrases. Only the places and the timings different. Two companies forward . . . barrage . . . about four hundred guns . . . tie up with tanks at forming-up place . . . all the details that are so dull in retrospect, so vital at the time. More things to mark on maps beginning to get crumpled and sodden. Officers scribbling the details that concern them in every kind of little note-book. Questions. 'Do you want me to push something forward to the wood after I've got the farm, sir?' . . . 'Am I responsible for the track, sir, or are "A" Company?' . . . 'Are we likely to get a meal up to-night, or does the emergency ration have to last?' . . . 'How soon can I expect anti-tank guns in my area?' . . .

The timings again, just to make sure that everyone is certain of them. From here at 07.20 so as to get to the forming-up place by 08.00, which gives us nearly an hour to get together with the tank people. Then from the forming-

up place at 08.52, which should just give nice time to cross the start-line at H-hour, 09.00. Remember the barrage is doing four 200-yard lifts, and staying on each one for twelve minutes. Keep close behind the barrage. Close as you can. Everybody clear? A last look through notes. Then away to the companies to pass the orders a stage further.

While the officers are receiving and giving orders the men are shaving and washing. And after they've shaved and washed they go for their breakfast, which has just arrived in containers brought up by the cooks. And while the officers are still giving out their orders, batmen surreptitiously place bowls or tins of water at hand, and the officers' shaving things. And when the officers have at last finished giving out their orders, and are reflectively re-reading their notes and thinking, 'Have I forgotten anything?' the batmen produce some breakfast, and with maternal brusqueness order the officers to eat it, as it's almost stone-cold now. The officers eat the breakfast, but the tea is too hot to drink quickly, so they start to shave and while they shave they keep having sips of their tea. And while they are shaving and sipping people keep coming up and asking them questions, and with a shaving-brush in one hand and a mug in the other the officers try to make quick, clear decisions about such varied problems as a man who has lost his nerve and refuses to participate, a vehicle that has burnt out a clutch, probable ammunition requirements that night—while the batmen look on and think, 'Can't they bloody well leave him alone for five minutes?'

It is all to the good, really, all this preliminary detail. It keeps your mind off yourself.

07.10 hours. Time to get ready. The shouts of the sergeant-majors. Jokes and curses. The Infantry heaving on to their backs and shoulders their complicated equipment, their weapons and the picks and shovels they have to carry too, so that they can quickly dig in on their objective.

The individuals resolving themselves into sections and platoons and companies. Jokes and curses.

'Able ready to move, sir.'

'Baker ready to move, sir.'

'Charlie ready to move, sir.'

'Dog ready to move, sir.'

The column moved off along the track we'd taken the previous night. It was Tuesday morning. It was the fifth day of the offensive. In England the headlines were announcing that the Gustav Line was smashed except for Cassino and Monastery Hill. 'Except' was the operative word. That was our job now. To break through and cut off Cassino and the Monastery.

On the stroke of nine there was an earth-shaking roar behind us as four hundred guns opened fire almost as one. With a hoarse, exultant scream four hundred shells sped low over our heads to tear into the ground less than five hundred yards in front, bursting with a mighty antiphonal crash that echoed the challenge of the guns. It was Wagnerian.

From then on the din was continuous and simultaneous: the thunder of the guns, the hugely amplified staccato of the shell-bursts close in front, and the vicious overhead scream that linked them with a frenzied counterpoint. And sometimes the scream became a whinny, and sometimes a kind of red-hot sighing, but most of the time it was just a scream—a great, angry, baleful scream. The fury of it was elemental, yet precise. It was a controlled cyclone. It was splendid to hear, as the moment of actual combat approached.

The makers of films like to represent this scene with shots of soldiers crouching dramatically in readiness, and close-ups of tense, grim faces. Whereas the striking thing about such moments is the matter-of-factness and casualness of the average soldier. It is true that hearts are apt to be thumping fairly hard, and everyone is thinking, 'Oh,

Christ!' But you don't in fact look grim and intense. For one thing you would look slightly foolish if you did. For another you have too many things to do.

The two leading companies were due to advance exactly eight minutes after the barrage opened. So those eight minutes were spent doing such ordinary things as tying up boot laces, helping each other with their equipment, urinating, giving weapons a final check, testing wireless-sets to make certain they were still netted, eating a bar of chocolate. The officers were giving last-minute instructions, marshalling their men into battle formations, or having a final check-up with the tank commanders with whom they were going to work.

Those who were not in the leading companies were digging like fiends, for they knew that the temporary calm would be quickly shattered as soon as the tanks and the leading infantry were seen emerging from it.

Meanwhile the barrage thundered on, and to its noise was added the roar of the Shermans' engines. A great bank of dust and smoke welled slowly up from the area the shells were pounding, so that you couldn't see the bursts any more. The sputtering of the twenty-five-pounders rippled up and down the breadth of the gun-lines faster than bullets from a machine-gun, so numerous were they.

At eight minutes past nine they moved. Geoff led his company round the right end, Mark led his round the left end of the bank which concealed us from the enemy in front. Then the Shermans clattered forward, with a crescendo of engine-roar that made even shouted conversation impossible. The battle was on.

Geoff and Mark were to reach the start-line in ten minutes, at which time the barrage was due to move forward two hundred yards. Geoff and Mark would edge up as close to it as possible—perhaps within a hundred and fifty yards, and they'd wait until it moved on again, and

then, following quickly in its wake, their bayonets and Brens would swiftly mop up any stunned remnants that survived. And while they were doing this the protective Shermans would blast with shells and machine-guns any more distant enemy post that sought to interfere.

Then the barrage would move forward another two hundred yards. The process would be repeated until the first objective had been secured—farm areas in each case. Then Kevin, who would soon be setting off, would pass his company through Geoff's and assault the final objective the code word for which was 'Snowdrop.' When Kevin wirelessed 'Snowdrop' the day's work would be largely done. Highway Six would be only two thousand yards away.

To-day was crucial. To-day would decide whether it was to be a break-through or a stabilized slogging-match here in the flat entrance to the Liri Valley, with our great concentrations of men and material at the mercy of the Monastery O.P.

The Boche reacted quickly. Within a few minutes of our barrage opening up the shells started coming back. The scream of their shells vied with the scream of ours. Salvo after salvo began to rain down on the farms and the groves to our rear, where our supporting echelons were massed ready to follow in the wake of the assault. The sun's rays, growing warmer every minute, cleared the last of the morning mist. The Monastery seemed to shed the haze as a boxer sheds his dressing-gown before stepping into the ring for the last round. Towering in stark majesty above the plain, where the whole of our force was stretched out for it to behold. This was the supreme moment—the final reckoning with the Monastery.

Mortar-bombs began to land on the crest immediately in front. The bits sizzled down on our positions. Ahead the machine-guns were joining in. The long low bursts of the Spandaus: and the Schmeissers, the German tommy-guns

that have an hysterical screech like a Hitler peroration. There were long answering rattles from the Besas of the Shermans. Then the Nebelwerfers, the six-barrelled rocket-mortars, as horrific as their name: a typically Germanic terror machine. The barrels discharge their huge rockets one at a time with a sound that is hard to put into words. It is like someone sitting violently on the bass notes of a piano, accompanied by the grating squeak of a diamond on glass. Then the clusters of canisters sail through the air with a fluttering chromatic whine, like jet-propelled Valkyries. Only the Germans could have devised such a machine. But, give them their due, few men could truthfully say they weren't terrified when the 'Nebs' opened up. There were several regiments of them facing us, and the existing cacophony was soon made infinitely more hideous by scores of Valkyries. They were landing well behind. For the time being the Boche were concentrating everything on the farms and the woods, that were crammed with concentrations of trucks and tanks and supplies of all kinds.

'You may as well push off now, Stuart,' John said. A minute later the fourth company moved round the right end of the bank and went the way of the others. The first of the prisoners came in. Six paratroops. Able Company's. Four large blond ones and two little dark ones. They were sent straight back.

Smoke-shells were being poured on to Monastery Hill now in a frantic effort to restore the mist. They had some effect, but they couldn't blot it out. The barrage seemed to get a second wind and the guns seemed to be firing faster than ever. The German shells were taking their toll of the rear areas. Four farms were on fire. We could see three ammunition-trucks blazing. Three more prisoners: one wounded, the other two helping him along. A grinning fusilier in charge. Some wounded in from Baker Company. All walking cases. Running commentary from tank liaison officer—'Rear Link.' He sits in a Honey tank at

our H.Q. and acts as wireless link between the squadron fighting with us in front and the tanks' regimental headquarters. 'Both companies moving well. Machine-gun has opened up on Baker Company. Freddie Troop moving round to cope.' The sharp crack of the Shermans' seventy-fives, and a burst of Besa that seems to go on for ever. That must be Freddie Troop 'coping.'

'Okay now,' says Rear Link. 'On the move again.'

The Nebelwerfers have quietened down. They're easy to spot. Perhaps the counter-battery boys have got on to them. Our turn now. They're shelling our ridge as well as mortaring it. Some close ones. Rear Link has news. How Troop reports that five men have just come out of a building it has been blasting for five minutes and surrendered. Able Company report all's well. Baker report all's well. Charlie Company, following up, report all seems to be well in front, some wounded on the way back from Able. Three shells just above us. A signaller is hit.

The barrage ends. The effect is like the end of a movement in a symphony when you want to applaud and don't. From now on the guns will confine themselves to steady visitations on the enemy's rear. Unless the infantry want something hit. In which case the whole lot will switch in a very few minutes on to the place the infantry want hit. The infantry want something hit now. The voice on the wireless says, 'Two machine-guns bothering me from two hundred yards north of Victor Eighty-two. Can you put something down?' John tells Harry, who is eating a sandwich. Harry gets on the wireless and says, 'Mike target—Victor Eighty-two—North two hundred—five rounds gunfire.' The shells scream over. Harry says, 'We may as well make sure.' He orders a repeat. The voice on the wireless says, 'Thanks. That seems to have done the trick. They're not firing any more.' Harry finishes his sandwich.

Rear Link has been deep in conversation with the left-

hand troop commander. Rear Link thinks the companies have reached the first objective. No, not quite. It is all right on the left. But the right company seems to have run into something. Trouble from a farm. Tanks moving round to help. A lot of firing, ours and theirs. Rear Link says the tanks are pouring everything they've got into the farm. Twelve more prisoners—they look more shaken than the others. They had a bad spot in the barrage. Rear Link asks the troop commander how the battle is going on the right. The troop commander says it is a bit confused. A platoon is moving round to a flank. The farm seems to be strongly held. A reserve troop has joined in. A tank has been hit and has 'brewed up.' Baker on the left report that they are on their first objective. Charlie report they are moving up to pass through Baker. The Nebelwerfers again. Not as many as before. Some of them, at any rate, have been discouraged by the counter-battery fire. They seem to be going for the Bailey a mile back on the main track. Our anti-tank guns are in that area waiting to be called forward. Hope they are all right. Get Charles on the wireless and ask him. Charles says two trucks hit. One man killed and ten wounded. It has been all right since the first shelling. Able Company report that they are now firmly on first objective. Some casualties getting the farm. But they've killed a lot of Germans, and got eleven prisoners. They're digging in. The tanks are protecting their right, which seems horribly open. The tanks are in great form. They won't stop firing. They are spraying everything that could possibly conceal a German.

It has become very unhealthy behind our ridge. They are still mainly hitting the top of it. So long as they stay up there it won't be too bad. But there is always a nasty uncertainty about it. If they add a few yards to the range they'll be landing right among us. One or two have already come half-way down the slope.

Rear Link getting excited again. He's been talking to

one of the troop commanders. Rear Link says Charlie appear to be on their objective. Can he signal 'Snowdrop' to his R.H.Q.? John says, 'No, not yet.' Rear Link gets another message from the tanks. Rear Link says Charlie have started to dig in. Can he signal 'Snowdrop'? John says, 'No. They haven't consolidated yet.' Kevin reports that he has arrived and is digging in. He says he has sent back more prisoners. More wounded, more prisoners, more Nebelwerfers, more shells, and the Monastery horribly clear. Rear Link has another conversation with the tanks. 'How about "Snowdrop," sir?' Rear Link almost pleads. 'Not yet,' John says. 'Not until they have consolidated.'

They're shelling us hard now. Not on the crest any more, but just over our heads and to our right. It is a different battery. They seem like 105's. They are coming over in eights. About every thirty seconds. The hard digging earlier in the morning is paying a good dividend. The last three salvoes landed right on our mortars, but they are well dug in and they get away without a single casualty. None of the shells has landed more than thirty yards from the command post. It is very frightening. Kevin on the wireless. Charlie Company are being counter-attacked with tanks. More shells on us. Twelve this time. Two of them within twenty yards. Behind, fortunately. Harry has taken a bearing on the guns and passed it back to the counter-battery people. Kevin on the wireless again. The leading Boche tank has got into a hull-down position fifty yards from his leading platoon. He has had some casualties. Our tanks trying to deal with it but hampered by very close-wooded country and a sunken lane that is an obstacle. Boche infantry are edging forward under cover of the fire from their tanks. More shells on the command post. The same place still. If they switch thirty yards to their left we've had it. That is the frightening thing. Wondering if they'll make a switch before they

fire again. The accuracy of the guns is their downfall. John tries to get Kevin on the wireless. The signaller cannot get through. His toneless signaller-voice goes on saying, 'Hello Three, hello, Three, hello Three, hello Three.' But he cannot get an answer. A closer shell blasted me against the bank. It is a queer feeling when you are brought to earth by blast. There is an instant of black-out, then sudden consciousness of what has happened: then an agonized wait for a spasm of pain somewhere on your person. Finally, a dull reactionary shock as you slowly discover you are intact. The signaller's voice again, 'Cannot—hear—you—clearly—say—again—say again—that's—better—hear—you—okay.' Kevin on the wireless. There is a tank deadlock. The rival tanks are now very close, on opposite sides of the same shallow crest. If either moves the other will get it the second the turret appears above the crest. The German cannot be outflanked. He has chosen his position cunningly. The sunken lane protects him. Kevin has had more casualties. More shells on the command post. Intense machine-gun fire from the direction of Kevin's company. Not a vestige of haze round the Monastery. This is the climax. No word from Kevin. John saying, 'Are you through to Charlie Company yet?' The signaller-voice tonelessly persevering: 'Hear my signals, hear my signals, hello Three . . . hear you very faintly. . . .' Then, after an eternity, 'Through now, sir. Message for you, sir.' It is Kevin on the wireless. A fusilier has knocked out the tank with a Piat. It has killed the crew. The tank is on fire. The others are withdrawing. The infantry are withdrawing. Charlie Company are getting some of them as they withdraw. The counter-attack is finished. Consolidation may proceed. The tension is broken.

It went from mouth to mouth. 'Bloke called Jefferson knocked out the tank with a Piat. Bloody good show! Bloke called Jefferson knocked out the tank with a Piat.

Bloody good show! Bloody good show—bloke called Jefferson . . .’ It passed from one to another till all the signallers knew, and the stretcher-bearers, and the mortar crews, and the pioneers: and the anti-tank gunners waiting some way behind, and some sappers who were searching for mines along the track verges. Till the whole world knew. ‘A chap called Jefferson . . .’

Kevin on the wireless. ‘No further attacks. Consolidation completed.’

‘Get on to Brigade,’ John said, ‘and report “Snowdrop”.’

‘Snowdrop,’ the Adjutant told Brigade.

‘Snowdrop,’ Brigade told Division.

‘Snowdrop,’ Division told Corps.

‘Snowdrop,’ Corps told Army.

In all the headquarters all the way back they rubbed out the mark on their operations maps showing our position in the morning and put it in again twelve hundred yards further forward, on the chalk-line called ‘Snowdrop.’ It was ten past two. The battle had been going for six hours.

‘Command post prepare to move,’ John said.

We advanced in extended order through the long corn, as the ground was completely flat and without cover. The smell of the barrage still lingered, and the lacerated ground testified to its thoroughness. Wondering how many of the farms away to the right were still occupied by Boche; wondering how many machine-guns were concealed in the woods and the olive groves which stretched across the front a thousand yards ahead. Wondering if anyone had spotted our wireless aerials, which are impossible to conceal, and which always give away a headquarters.

There wasn’t a vestige of cover in the half-mile stretch to where the reserve company had dug in. There was still a lot of firing in front, mainly from the tanks. They were taking no chances with the open right flank. They were dosing all the farms in turn. With nine tell-tale wireless aerials swaying loftily above the heads of the sweating

signallers who carried the sets on their backs, we pushed on quickly through the long corn, wishing it was a good deal longer. And the Monastery watched us all the way.

As soon as the command post was established in the area of the reserve company, John went forward to where Kevin's company were, and he took me with him. They had turned the area into a compact little strong-point. It had to be compact, because there were fewer than fifty of them left out of ninety who had set off in the morning. Besides which the country was so thick with trees that you couldn't see more than fifty yards ahead. They had adapted some of the excellent German trenches to face the other way. Some were reading the highly coloured magazines left behind by the Boche. These were filled with lurid artists' impressions of the Cassino fighting bearing such captions as 'Our paratroop supermen defying the Anglo-American hordes in living Hell of Cassino.' They were all on that level. There was one copy of a sumptuous fashion magazine, which seemed slightly incongruous, and suggested that the Rhine-maidens weren't all the drab blue-stockings the Nazis made them out to be. There was one of the famous new steel pill-boxes: an underground three-roomed flatlet, which included a well-stocked larder. Only its small, rounded, steel turret protruded above the ground, and this was skilfully camouflaged.

A few yards away Jefferson's tank was still burning. They were all talking about Jefferson. They were all saying he saved the Company. The tank had wiped out a section at sixty yards' range, and was systematically picking off the rest of the Company in ones and twos until fewer than fifty were left. Then Jefferson, on an impulse, and without orders, snatched up a Piat and scrambled round to a position only a few yards from the tank. Unable to get in a shot from behind cover, he had stood up in full view of the enemy and fired his weapon standing up, so that the back-blast of the exploding bomb knocked him flat on his

back. Then he had struggled to his feet and aimed a shot at the second tank—but the tank was hurriedly pulling back, and with it the Boche infantry. It was one of those things that aren't in the book. Jefferson was typical of the best Lancashire soldiers—quiet and solid and rather shy, yet able in an emergency to act quickly without seeming to hurry. Such men are nice to have around in battles. It was one of those deeds the full implications of which don't really strike you till some time later, then leave you stunned and humble.

In the late afternoon we watched the Spitfires and the Mustangs flying over to round off the day's work. We watched them peel off one at a time and go streaking down. Some of us remembered when the aircraft used to be Stukas and came from the opposite direction and dived on us. It seemed ages ago.

To the normal night sounds—of the guns and the exploding shells and the bursts of machine-gun fire, and the muffled thunder of violent bombardment on another front—was added the noise of the bulldozers, which were busily transforming the lane along which we had advanced in the morning. So that men who had used it earlier in the day got lost when they returned along it the same night, because the bulldozers had turned it into a wide military road, and many of the original curves and corners had been rubbed out. The traffic congestion behind was terrific. While half the guns kept up a night-long harassing fire, the other half were crossing the river and moving up to new positions a mile or two behind us. The traffic congestion was so great that our evening meal did not get through to us until 2 a.m., and then only because it was on jeeps which finally managed to elbow and twist their way through.

With the meal came letters from England, and heartening news of the battle as a whole—in a forward battalion you know very little of what goes on outside your own small piece of front. The Irish on our left had had a similar day

to ourselves: the Canadians and the French had had a good day too. I think we knew that night that the worst of the operation was behind us. Nevertheless, it was an anxious night. We were tired and hungry: our reduced numbers meant extra spells of duty for everyone: our position was isolated, and the closeness of the country meant that the Boche could infiltrate almost up to our positions without being seen. And always there was the fear of counter-attacks. You can never have an easy night when there is nothing between you and the enemy. And the more tired you are the greater is your fear of counter-attack.

During the night we received orders to continue the advance at 6 a.m. and secure the next objective-line, 'Bluebell.' This was to synchronize with the Poles, who were to make a final attempt to work round from our old position north-east of Cassino, and cut the Highway from their side.

It was well after three by the time everyone had been fed, ammunition had been replenished, and orders for the new attack had been given out. Before he went to sleep John said, 'I'm going to put Jefferson in for the V.C.'

At a quarter to six the earth trembled, and once again the shells started pouring overhead so thickly that at times you fancied you could see them. At the same time another lot of guns began to pound Monastery Hill in support of the Polish attack. In next to no time dust and smoke and yellow flame enveloped the Monastery itself, so that when our Dog and Baker Companies passed through Charlie Company on the stroke of six it was hidden from view. This was the kill. We were going in for the kill. The Poles were sweeping round from the right: we, two and a half miles away in the valley, were on our way to seal it off from the left. It shouldn't be long now. And once we had cut the Highway the very qualities that had made the Monastery an impregnable bastion for so long would turn

it into an equally formidable death-trap. For so long the guardian and protector of its garrison, it would round on them in its death-throes and destroy them.

Compared with the previous day, we had a fairly easy advance. There were some snipers and one or two isolated machine-guns, but they didn't seem disposed to resist very strongly, and by ten Baker and Dog, assisted by fresh tanks, were nicely settled on Bluebell, another thousand yards on. We were ordered to push on as fast as possible. So Baker and Dog advanced again to the final objective line, 'Tulip,' twelve hundred yards further on. And Able, Charlie and Command Post pushed on to the area just cleared by Dog and Baker. By four o'clock in the afternoon Dog and Baker both signalled that they were established on Tulip—both had O.P.s directly overlooking Highway Six. Both asked permission to carry on and cut the road and search beyond it. We were ordered to stay where we were, however, as the exact position of the Poles was not known and mistakes might occur if we both started milling around by the road. We dominated it from where we were. We had done what was required of us. We were to stay where we were until we had further orders. The job was nearly done.

During the night Dog and Baker were told to patrol as far as the road. Not till the following morning were we allowed to send anyone beyond it. By that time it had ceased to be a military feat. It was a formal ceremony. So John sent a special patrol of three corporals, all holders of the M.M. They crossed the Highway and carried out a careful search of the gullies and ruined buildings on the far side of it, but the only Germans they could find were dead ones. Their time was not wasted, however. Each returned with a Schmeisser gun, a camera, a watch and a pair of binoculars of impeccable German manufacture. An hour later the Poles entered the Monastery. As so often happens when great events are awaited with prolonged and exces-

sive anxiety, the announcement of the fall of Monte Cassino was rather an anticlimax. It was Thursday, May 18th. The battle had lasted a week. The job was done.

We drove through the olive groves to the Highway, and Stott turned the jeep into the fabulous stream of tanks and guns and trucks that was sweeping towards Rome like a tidal wave.

The eyes of the Infantry, smarting from the fine white dust, stared as usual from the backs of the trucks, resting for the last time on the Monastery, as it slowly receded from view. They had beaten it in the end. It had taken a bit of doing, but they had beaten it in the end. Or had they? As the corner-stone of enemy resistance it had certainly fallen. But as a memorial to courage and a symbol of something higher than human folly it stood where the monk, Benedict, had founded it fifteen hundred years before. If Benedict had been in the back of one of those trucks he might have been having a quiet laugh to himself. He could not felt other than proud that his abbey, still noble in ruin, should become a natural memorial to the humble greatness of the Infantry private soldier.

The Monastery disappeared out of sight, and the trucks droned along the dusty road, carrying the soldiers to Rome and other new battles.

